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ABSTRACT

The "Talk It Out" approach is presented for use by elementary school teachers. Talk It Out employs the techniques of conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation in order to resolve problems that occur in most classrooms, such as teasing, put-downs, pushing, hitting, cheating, gossiping and refusing to share. Readers are provided classroom anecdotes which illustrate the use and effectiveness of Talk It Out. Chapter titles are: (1) How Talk It Out Was Developed; (2) Guiding Children through the Process; (3) Creating the Conflict Corner; (4) On-the-Spot Problem Solving; (5) Moving toward Independent Problem Solving; (6) The Class Meeting Option; (7) Peers as Peacemakers; (8) When You and a Student Talk It Out; (9) When It's Time to Take Over; (10) Fine Tuning to Match the Child and the Moment; (11) Problem Solving Isn't the Only Way; and (12) Toward a Talk It Out School. Thirteen appendixes present practical tips, lesson plans, step-by-step scripts, and other materials that will be useful in introducing conflict resolution skills and helping students internalize them. Contains 28 references. (TS)

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Talk It Out

Conflict Resolution in the Elementary Classroom

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Talk It Out

Conflict Resolution in the Elementary Classroom

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Illustrated by Peaco Todd

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And to the hundreds of children who have been in my classroom, for teaching me how to teach.

—Barbara Porro

The Daily Shark Attack

1

How Talk It Out Was Developed

I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.
—Chinese Proverb

Teaching math and reading has always been a piece of cake compared to the overwhelming task of handling my students' everyday problems. Mine was an active classroom. My students enjoyed learning and the fun activities I planned. They loved to socialize and work together in groups. But the more they talked, the more they disagreed.

"Rosa stole my pencil!"

"Anthony said my picture's dumb!"

"It's no fair."

I tried to make it better. I soothed and cajoled. I reprimanded. I put things in perspective.

"Give him back the pencil."

"Let's not worry about that now."

"Life isn't always fair."

Yet their tattled tales persisted and continually wore me out.

Why were my students so tough? For years I thought it was just bad luck, that fate handed me the wiggly ones to test my endurance and strength. But as the years wore on, I began to accept the fact that children are by nature physically active, egocentric, and socially inexperienced. If I was going to survive classroom life, I would either have to develop a "hairy eyeball" or help my students get along. Having never been convincing as an authoritarian, I was stuck with the challenge of teaching children social skills in addition to the basics.

Unfortunately, I did not know how to do that, so I relied on my instincts. How I dealt with children's problems was based largely on how much time I had, how much patience I could muster, and an intuitive sense of what needed to happen next. Because I had no explicit method for handling conflict in my room, my approach was neither consistent nor effective.

In the summer of 1989, a series of events changed all that. The Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center (P.C.R.C.), a neighborhood dispute mediation program in San Mateo, California, decided to provide outreach services to schools. I was hired to direct the School Project. In preparation for this work, I received formal training in conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation skills. It was enlightening, both personally and professionally.

I discovered I was an avoider. I ignore conflict along with any unpleasant emotion because my mother taught me to be nice—and nice girls don't say upsetting things. I found out it is possible to be honest about feelings and needs without losing a friendship, and if I listen carefully to the other person's concerns, we can solve the problem in ways that satisfy us both. Though I became acquainted with these ideas, I didn't believe in them—not until my neighbor brought the lesson home.

Love Thy Neighbor

As the summer coursework ended, I received a disturbing letter from my neighbor. She wrote that she was sorry it had come to the point of writing the letter, but she was filled with resentment about my intrusive and inconsiderate life-style. She listed numerous ways I was unfit to live in the neighborhood and suggested I was more suited for the "multiple people dwellings that one might find in lesser areas." The letter ended with a threat: "I am at the end of my patience and will stop at nothing to restore my sense of feeling comfortable and secure in my own home." At the bottom she indicated a copy had been sent to my landlord.

I was outraged! How dare this woman slander my character, jeopardize my relationship with my landlord, and endanger my home, the last reasonable rental in this cute little neighborhood? I paced and sputtered and said nasty things aloud. I mentally prepared to take her on. I knew a good lawyer.

Then I remembered conflict resolution. This is a good learning opportunity, I thought. I'll make an attempt to talk to her. If she lets me in the door, I'll use the process and prove it does not work with unreasonable people.

Stop and Cool Off

I began with the first step: cool off. It made sense. I would only do damage if I approached my neighbor with my raw emotions. So, I vacuumed the house vigorously and went to aerobics. I read the letter to several friends who agreed I was respectable and she was out of line.

I felt calm enough, finally, to phone my landlord, assess the damage, and try to recover my good name. He reported that he had not yet received a letter, but he had received a phone call from my neighbor recently. She was a real-estate agent and called to say she had found a buyer for his house. My jaw tightened. This woman was determined to get me out of the neighborhood. I assured my landlord I could solve the problem without his help.

The next day I had simmered down sufficiently to make the call to my neighbor. "Can we talk?" I asked. She didn't see any reason for a conversation. I told her it would help me to understand better what was upsetting her. I had learned that in the training. If I wanted her to talk to me, I would have to present the idea in a way that appealed to her. She changed her mind and agreed to tell me about all my annoying habits. We set a date for Saturday. That allowed me more time to cool off and the chance to review my notes.

By the time Saturday arrived, I had lightened up considerably. As tense as the conversation was likely to be, I was convinced I had nothing to lose. If worst came to worst, I decided, I could always ask the rest of my neighbors to sign a letter saying I was respectable and she was unreasonable. This would not have been difficult to do.

Notebook in hand, I took a deep breath and knocked at her door. We exchanged pleasantries, then I sat on her sofa and began. "We seem to have two completely different ways of viewing what is appropriate neighborhood behavior. I don't understand how you see it. Please tell me what is bothering you."

Listen

For the next 45 minutes, I endured her long list of objections to the way I conducted life. The bald patch on my lawn was lowering property values. The cars parked in front of my house were spoiling her view. The constant stream of "strange people" sleeping only a few feet away from her bedroom made her physically uncomfortable. With each point, my disbelief and anger grew. Yet I did not interrupt and defend. That was against the rules of respectful listening. Instead I asked for clarification, nodded, paraphrased. "Let me see if I understand. You have trouble sleeping at night when you've seen a strange face in the neighborhood." This was the most unnatural listening I had ever done.

"What else?" I kept asking. "Anything else that has bothered you?" It was important to elicit all her issues. She talked about the noisy entertaining that took place on my front porch and lawn and my lack of understanding and respect for what was proper in the neighborhood. Finally, when she began to repeat herself, I knew we had reached the bottom of the heap.

Looking over the long list, I nodded and replied, "I think I understand how you see it now." Good thing I had taken the training or I never would have come up with that response. The phrase "I understand how you see it" does not imply agreement. Instead, I had gained a completely different view of the situation. And after listening for 45 minutes, I had my first real sense of who this woman was. She was from another country with a culture foreign to me. She had unusual values, attitudes, and beliefs. Her well-manicured lawn and rose garden perfectly reflected her sense of propriety and need for control. We were as different as people can be. My life-style really did offend and threaten her.

Talk

Now it was my turn. I asked if I could tell her about the situation from my perspective and waited for her to throw me out the door. Instead she answered, "Yes. Tell me how you see it." My jaw dropped. This was someone quite different from the person who had written that letter. In that moment I learned that if you want someone to hear what you have to say, you must first listen, really listen, for a long time. And because I listened respectfully, the respectful person in my neighbor had revealed herself.

I talked about myself: that I was single, and the way I made my life work emotionally was to have friends visit. Because I have lived most of my life on the East coast, long-distance friends often stayed for days, even weeks at a time. What looked like homeless strangers to her were in fact my extended family members.

I told her I could easily ask friends to park in my driveway instead of the street. She conceded that it was really only the "hippie van" that bothered her. (I was dating a Grateful Deadhead at the time.) I talked about my own frustration with the lawn and asked for her advice. She recommended more water and a particular kind of fertilizer.

I could tell she was listening. She did not neatly restate my ideas as I had done; she clearly had not taken any conflict resolution training. But she became a bit defensive about a bridal shower I'd recently given for a friend. "Surely you don't think that party wasn't an imposition?" she queried. Twelve women embroidered and read poetry on my front lawn for two hours on Sunday afternoon. I told her it had never occurred to me that what I did in my own front yard would bother anyone. "Since that kind of thing doesn't bother me," I admitted, "I guess I assumed the same was true for you." That covered most of the issues from both our perspectives.

Define the Problem in Terms of Needs

Next came the tricky part. We needed to redefine the problem in terms of what we need—our underlying interests—something quite different from what we say we want. She wanted to have me evicted, but what she really needed was a quiet neighbor who would keep the front yard looking nice and not scare her with strange faces. My counteroffense might have been to prove that she was crazy. My real interest, however, was in getting her to stop

undermining my relationship with my landlord and to stop trying to sell his house.

At this point in the conversation, it's useful to point out common interests. Before taking the training, I would have been hard pressed to imagine having anything in common with my neighbor. I had learned, however, that in conflict situations you always have more in common than you have at difference. We are, after all, humans with the same basic needs.

Looking over my neighbor's list of complaints, I reframed the situation. "We have a lot in common. We both love our homes. Neither of us wants to move. And we both want to feel safe." I ended with my good intentions, "I know we can work this out in a way that's comfortable for both of us."

"I can't stand you. You can't stand me. What else do we have in common?"

Brainstorm Solutions, Choose, and Plan

I never dreamed we would get this far into the process, and had not arrived at her door with solutions to suggest. My list of ideas, however, would not have been helpful here. To come up with solutions that would satisfy both our needs required that we put our two very different heads together.

I tossed out an idea. "How would it be if I introduced you to my friends when they visit? Would that help you feel more comfortable at night?"

"Yes," she replied.

"How long should friends be here before I trouble you with a call?"

"Four days," she suggested, and I wrote that down. If meeting my friends would ease her discomfort and stop her attempts to get rid of me, I could live with that.

Next she proposed that I stop entertaining on my porch. "In this neighborhood," she informed me, "it is not proper to use the common area in the front to socialize."

This was a hard one. The front area with its view of the flowers, squirrels, and birds was my favorite place to sit. "What is it about my being out there that bothers you?" I asked. Here again I was attempting to explore the real issue beneath her rigid position.

"The noise," she answered.

I do not consider myself a noisy person, but our houses were quite close. I offered a counterproposal: "How about if I only use the front area for quiet conversation and socialize with my noisy friends out back?"

She thought that would be all right.

I reviewed the two solutions I suggested earlier. I agreed to work on my lawn and to have my friend with the van park in my driveway. She said she would be happy to lend me some fertilizer.

More Talk

The conversation was starting to feel finished when I realized I had not yet stated my big concern: that she stop trying to get rid of me. This was especially difficult for a recovering accommodator. Luckily, I was prepared. I had practiced stating my concerns in nonblaming language many times before arriving.

"I felt threatened when you sent this to my landlord," I said, holding out the letter, "because it sounds like you are trying to get me evicted."

"Oh, I wasn't trying to get you evicted," she replied.

This was a stunning moment, one I had heard about in the training. If you hang in there long enough, I was told, a conciliatory remark will float into the room. There it was.

"I'm relieved to hear that," I said, smiling. "Then there's just one other issue."

"What's that?" she asked.

"What if my landlord takes this as an attempt to evict me?"

"Well, I'll call him and tell him we worked it all out," she replied. "I don't know why I bothered him anyway."

By the time I left her house, her arm was on my shoulder. The seemingly irrational person who had written that venomous letter had her arm on my shoulder! I walked away shaking my head. Conflict resolution had worked, even though she had not taken the course, even though I didn't believe it would work.

The next day she appeared at my door with some plums from her tree, a bag of fertilizer (she got right to work on the lawn project!), and an apology. She was sorry she had said I didn't deserve to live in the neighborhood. I thanked her.

Our relationship shifted gradually after that two-hour talk. First, I introduced her to every friend who visited me that summer, and she eventually told me I didn't have to introduce her to any more of my guests. Meanwhile, she called my landlord and let him know we had worked everything out. The bald patch on my lawn turned green. In fact, that was the summer I spent many weekends out of town courting my future husband. Often after long weekends away, I would return to find my lawn watered. Now she was actually taking care of my grass!

I often think back to our talk and marvel how the process worked. It truly felt like magic. How were we able to reconcile our differences when minutes before we were prepared for war?

I can only say how I changed. The process I struggled so hard to follow prohibited me from acting on old instincts. Each time I disagreed with what she said, I listened and acknowledged her perspective as valid instead of telling her how wrong she was. Later when it was my turn to talk, she was able to do the same. Once all our issues sat squarely on the table, we looked at them together, scratched our heads, and asked, "Given that we are so different, how can we live side by side as neighbors?" Our brains did not fail us. We were creative enough to dream up solutions that not only satisfied our needs and improved the situation, but also made for a friendlier relationship.

The summer training in conflict resolution along with the firsthand experience with my neighbor convinced me of the power and importance of this new approach. I was eager to take these lessons back to my 2nd graders, whose neverending tattled tales drained my patience and good humor, increased my stress and frustration, and wasted valuable teaching time.

Tattled Tales Are Teachable Moments

With new awareness, I returned to my room in the fall and watched how my attempts to fix children's problems fed into a vicious cycle. Each time I lectured, advised, or smoothed things over, children's dependence upon me for solutions increased. Handling children's conflicts was not the same as teaching children to handle conflicts on their own. If I was serious about getting my students to solve their problems without me, I would have to teach them conflict resolution skills as formally as I had been taught in the summer workshops.

I went to the library in search of curriculums to serve as the content of my conflict resolution course for children. I was surprised to discover how many resources were available for teachers. Books on the subject covered communication and problem-solving skills and also presented lessons in mediation, cooperation, and tolerance. Some authors even included multicul-

tural education, bias-awareness activities, and lessons in global citizenship. Conflict resolution covered a lot of territory.

At first I was relieved. I would not have to spend valuable time inventing lesson plans. But as I plowed through the materials, I soon became overwhelmed. Each teacher's guide suggested many more lessons than I would ever have time to teach. The thought of adding one more hefty subject to my already crowded day left me discouraged before even beginning. How could this extensive body of knowledge be pared down for the busy classroom teacher?

To answer the question, I clarified my goal. What did I want my conflict resolution program to accomplish? First and foremost, my objective was to teach students to act differently in the face of real-life conflict. Instead of retaliating, withdrawing, or running to me for solutions, I wanted students to handle their conflicts positively and—eventually—without my help.

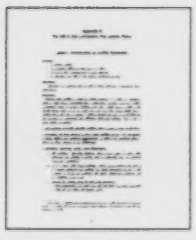
For the sake of time and efficiency, I narrowed the focus of my program to include only those skills children need to settle their differences peacefully. Using the adult process as a guide, I developed a six-step version for children, shown in Figure 1.1. I named the process "Talk It Out" instead of the more abstract "conflict resolution" because "Talk It Out" says what it means and provides a clear contrast to the well-established "fight it out" approach.

FIGURE 1.1
How To Talk It Out

1. Stop. Cool off.
2. Talk and listen to each other.
3. Find out what you both need.
4. Brainstorm solutions.
5. Choose the idea you both like.
6. Make a plan. Go for it!

From *Talk It Out: Conflict Resolution in the Elementary Classroom*, copyright © 1996 by Barbara Ibrro.

I used one week of social studies time to introduce students to the Talk It Out steps. On the first day, we explored conflict and the three choices of response when disagreements occur: ignoring, fighting it out, or Talking It Out. We role-played the three options and examined the consequences of each. I told the children I expected them to Talk It Out whenever they had problems and that we would spend the rest of the week learning how.



See Appendix B
p. 119

Each day after that we explored a new step: how to cool off, how to talk about feelings, how to listen, and how to find fair solutions. (These five lesson plans can be found in Appendix B). By Friday I felt confident. The children had all the knowledge they needed to settle their own disputes. I kicked back and waited to enjoy the fruits of my labor.

I was totally unprepared for what happened next. Monday morning, a stampede of unhappy children greeted me with reports of the latest awful thing that just happened.

"Brittney won't let me play!"

"Eddie cut in line!"

"Tawana's not my friend anymore!"

I had piqued their interest in conflict, all right. The Talk It Out part, however, clearly escaped them. My worst fear came true. Now there were more than 30 children whining in my face instead of a handful! I had opened Pandora's Box and now had to deal with the whole angry mess.

I took a deep breath and asked the children to help figure out what to do next. The discussion that followed clarified two points. There were lots of conflicts in our room and thus the need for conflict resolution. And, until the children were skillful enough to Talk It Out on their own, I would have to be on hand to guide them through the process.

Thus began my education in how to help children internalize the difficult lessons I had quickly summarized the week before.

What's in This Book

The rest of the story follows: how I worked with my students over the course of the year to teach them to Talk It Out.* Chapters begin with classroom anecdotes and include much of what I've learned: practical tips, lesson plans, step-by-step scripts, and materials I hope will be useful in guiding your own students toward developing solutions to their everyday social problems. Most of the teaching materials are introduced in the body of the text and reproduced in full form in the appendixes; icons in the text margin signal discussion of these teaching materials, many of which may be photocopied for use in your classroom.

Since I first developed the Talk It Out approach, the materials have gone through years of refinement. My job as director of the P.C.R.C. School Project gave me the opportunity to work with teachers in more than 25 elementary schools in San Mateo County as they struggled to help students internalize the skills. Their questions, feedback, and insights have deepened this work immeasurably.

Yet there is nothing sacred in these pages. I encourage you, as I have others, to take these ideas and make them your own. Adjust what you read to match your teaching style and the special needs of your students. Use what works. Throw out the rest. There are unlimited ways to empower children to responsibly handle their problems. Perhaps this book will serve as a springboard for inventing ideas of your own.

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*The Talk it Out approach actually evolved over several years of teaching experiences. For literary purposes, I have condensed the story into a single year here. The children and the events described are based on real children and real events, though names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

The story will sound familiar. Teaching conflict resolution is not so different from teaching any curriculum area. Children learn by doing. They learn to read by being immersed in a world of language and books. They become skillful in math by manipulating objects and numbers. They learn to resolve conflict by communicating clearly and thinking creatively when they disagree. (And isn't this the way I had learned? First in formal instruction, then by talking with my neighbor.) Luckily—or unluckily—we are seldom at a loss for teachable moments. The constant stream of tattled tales provides plenty of opportunities to learn peacemaking skills. Resolving real-life problems is the centerpiece of this program.

That's the good news. You already know how to teach conflict resolution because you already know how to teach. Unfortunately, there is no quick and easy way to help children master these skills. Teaching children to solve their social problems requires as much focus, commitment, and patience as any teaching task. Some students learn it quickly. Others won't get it this year. The majority will need you to hold their hand every step of the way. Had I realized how much effort would be required, I may never have taken it on. Yet conflict has a way of stealing class time whether I've planned for it or not. I may as well respond to conflict in consistent ways that teach students the skills they need to solve their problems without me.

Had I imagined how far-reaching the lessons would be, I never would have hesitated. The big benefit is that you no longer have to play "fixer-cop." You don't have to figure out what happened or who is right and wrong. No more lectures, forced apologies, or judgments. The pressure's off. Children's problems belong to children. Your job is to stay emotionally neutral and help children discover answers of their own. You'll find you're not so stressed at the end of the day when you've stopped taking responsibility for everything that goes wrong. And, as children solve problems without you, there's more time for the lessons you've planned.

The obvious payoff for children is that they learn they are smart enough and responsible enough to solve their problems without you. They discover that when they have a problem, they need a solution, not a teacher to pass judgment, not retaliation or revenge. No more need to blame others to avoid getting into trouble. No more trouble.

That's not all. While children practice Talking It Out, they are also communicating orally, listening, analyzing problems, thinking creatively, brainstorming solutions, predicting outcomes, making decisions, developing plans, testing them out, and evaluating the results. Teaching conflict resolution is not really a departure from what we're paid to teach. These basic process skills can be found in any curriculum guide.

Conflict resolution education also teaches children lessons in life I never learned in school. They discover that conflict is natural. When things go wrong it's normal to feel angry, hurt, and frustrated. They learn to approach conflicts as problems to be solved, to assert their feelings and needs responsibly, and to listen openly to another's perspective. They find out that winning doesn't necessarily come at the expense of the other person; that they can get what they want without being disrespectful, aggressive, or violent; and that if they

put their heads together they are creative enough to come up with solutions that satisfy everyone involved. Imagine a world in which these concepts and skills were basic to everyone.

What's Not in This Book

This book is intended to help deal with the "garden variety" conflicts that occur in most classrooms—teasing, put-downs, who's first, who's the boss, not sharing, taking things, telling secrets, cutting, bugging, hitting, pushing, cheating, rumors, gossip—to name a few. There are many equally pressing problems we face in our classrooms today. How can we work most effectively with children with special needs? How can we educate against bias and racism? How can we eliminate prejudice and discrimination? How do we handle scapegoating? How can we increase children's appreciation and respect for cultural diversity?—to name a few. These important issues are beyond the scope of this work.

"I'm willing to Talk It Out as long as it turns out MY way."

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2 Guiding Children Through the Process

"THE TALK IT OUT SONG"
(sung to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat")

Talk, talk, talk it out
That's the friendly way.
Help each other work things out.
Then we all can play!

It is late September. I'm on the playground and Kaitlin is tugging at my sleeve. "Tasha won't play with me," she reports through her tears. Though Kaitlin attended my crash course in how to Talk It Out, she still runs to me to make it better. She is one student who will require lots of practice before she'll solve problems on her own.

Tasha needs practice, too. Kaitlin is not the first person she has disappointed at recess. I look around the playground; it is relatively quiet. I decide to use the occasion to give Kaitlin and Tasha a chance to practice Talking It Out.

Me: What's the problem?
Kaitlin: (sobbing) Tasha won't play with me!

Me: So, you're upset that Tasha won't play with you. Does Tasha know you want to play with her?

Kaitlin: (sniffing) Yes. I asked her this morning and she said yes. And now she's playing with Jennifer.

Me: Oh, so Tasha agreed to play with you, and instead she's playing with Jennifer. How are you feeling?

Kaitlin: Mad.

Me: Would you like to Talk It Out with Tasha?

Kaitlin: Yah. But she probably won't.

Me: I'll talk to Tasha about that. Are you ready to Talk It Out now or do you need more time to cool off?

Kaitlin: I think I'm ready. (Sniff.)

Kaitlin waits while I approach Tasha and motion for her to come join us:

Me: Kaitlin wants to Talk It Out with you.

Tasha and I join Kaitlin, and we stand facing one another.

Me: Kaitlin, tell us what happened.

Kaitlin: Tasha promised to play with me, and then she went off with Jennifer.

Me: So you asked Tasha to play, she said yes, and then she played with someone else.

Kaitlin: Yeah.

Me: Can you tell Tasha how you feel? Start with I. Say, "Tasha, I . . . "

Kaitlin: (turning to Tasha) Tasha, I feel mad when you won't play with me.

Me: Thanks, Kaitlin. Now, Tasha, it's your turn. What happened?

Tasha: Well, Jennifer asked me first so I had to play with her.

Me: So Jennifer asked you to play before Kaitlin.

Tasha: Yeah. Jennifer asked me yesterday.

Me: Let's see if I understand. Jennifer asked you yesterday, Kaitlin asked you today, and you said yes to both girls. How are you feeling right now?

Tasha: Kinda bad. Cuz I don't want Kaitlin to be mad at me.

Me: So it's important that you stay friends with Kaitlin. Well, when Kaitlin asked you to play this morning, did you want to play with her?

Tasha: Yah.

Me: Would you tell her that?

Tasha: (to Kaitlin) I really did want to play with you, Kaitlin. It's just that Jennifer asked me first.

Me: (to both) So, it sounds like you both need a chance to play together, is that right? (Both nod, then I address them together.) Let's see if you can think of four ways you can get together and play. Who has an idea?

Tasha: I could play with Kaitlin tomorrow.

Kaitlin: No! I want to play today!

Me: Kaitlin, remember the rules of brainstorming? First we come up with lots of ideas. Then, in the next step we'll find out how you feel about the ideas. Okay. Tasha and Kaitlin play tomorrow. That's one idea. (I hold up one finger and continue keeping track as more ideas are named.) Who has another idea?

Kaitlin: We could play next recess.

Me: That's two ideas. What's another way you can get together and play?

Tasha: We could play after school.

Kaitlin: We could do Children's Choice time together.

Me: All right, that's four ideas. Any others? (No response.) Now, which idea do you both like?

Kaitlin: Playing next recess.

Me: Does that idea work for you, Tasha?

Tasha: Well, Jennifer and I were going to finish playing then.

Kaitlin: Can I play too?

Tasha: Okay.

Me: So you both like the idea that Kaitlin joins Tasha and Jennifer when they play next recess. For that idea to work, what needs to happen first?

Tasha: I have to tell Jennifer.

Me: Any ideas about what three girls can play?

Kaitlin: We could play jump rope.

Tasha: Okay.

Me: What if Jennifer says she wants to play with Tasha by herself?

Tasha: Then I could play with Kaitlin tomorrow.

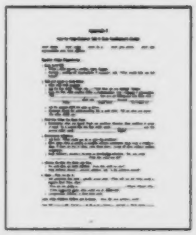
Kaitlin: During the long recess.

Me: So, the plan is that Tasha will check with Jennifer and see if she'll play jump rope with Kaitlin next recess. And if that doesn't work, Tasha will play with Kaitlin during lunch recess tomorrow. Is the problem solved?

Both: Yeah.

Me: Congratulations! You worked hard to find a solution.

Helping Children Talk It Out



See Appendix C p. 133

Playing the role of facilitator was often quite challenging, especially at first. Many parts of the process were new and unfamiliar, and I found that if I relied upon my instincts, I invariably slipped into doing business the old way. Eventually I prepared a Facilitator's Script (Appendix C) that helped me be more consistent and effective in guiding children through the steps.

The other challenge, of course, was that the children didn't always give the response I had in mind. When they threw a curve, we'd all get off track. It took many trials and errors before I became confident enough to handle the variety of situations children presented. I've shared this information in the discussion that follows. Each of the six steps is fully explored: its purpose, how to keep children focused, what might go wrong, and suggestions for handling trouble spots.

The danger of telling you everything I've learned about leading children through the process is that you may be overwhelmed. If you find yourself getting bogged down with too much detail, skip ahead to the next chapters that talk about how the process becomes shorter once children become proficient. The troubleshooting tips may make better sense, anyway, after you've had the chance to get your feet wet and form questions of your own.

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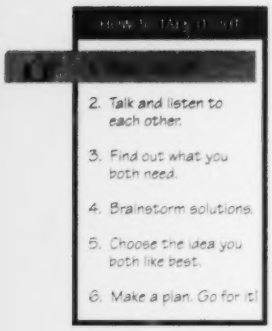

2. Talk and listen to each other.
3. Find out what you both need.
4. Brainstorm solutions.
5. Choose the idea you both like best.
6. Make a plan. Go for it!

Step 1: Stop and Cool Off

The purpose of the first step is to help Kaitlin cool off and understand her problem. Offering Kaitlin attention and support is a sure way to encourage her to release her feelings and become clear about what she needs.

Let the Child Know You Care, You Hear, You Understand

What do you typically do when someone has "done you wrong"? You fuss, fume, get red in the face, swear, or talk to an understanding friend. Children are no different. When things go wrong at school, they fuss, fume, get red in the face, and, if they feel safe enough, run to us and "tell."

Children report their problems in an effort to meet two basic needs. They want someone to care about them and the awful thing that just happened, and they want someone to fix it, to right the wrong. On a good day, when we have the time and patience, many of us are inclined to accommodate the needs of the upset child, to soothe hurt feelings and somehow make it better again. After all, that's our job as teachers, right? Only half right. It is important to empathize with children's hurt feelings. It is not helpful to fix problems children are capable of fixing themselves.

How can we empathize without fixing? By listening to what children say and letting them know we hear them.

Me: What's the problem?
Kaitlin: (sobbing) Tasha won't play with me!
Me: So, you're upset that Tasha won't play with you.

This simple restatement of Kaitlin's feelings and concerns tells her I take her problem seriously and care enough to want to understand. A reassuring response from me helps dissipate Kaitlin's tears and prepare her for the thinking process that follows.

Tuning in to what children say and reflecting back what you hear is actually more difficult than it would seem. We are so accustomed to handling complaints quickly, we often try and make the problem go away without giving it much thought. We say things like "That's too bad. Why don't you find someone else to play with." Or, "Well, the bell's going to ring in a minute anyway." It takes a conscious effort to change an automatic response to a more empathic one that sets the stage for problem solving.

See Appendix B p. 119

Help the Child Cool Off

Although Kaitlin cooled off quickly, some children need time or an activity to help them feel calm enough to proceed. Taking a deep breath, getting a drink of water, and counting to 10 are a few quick strategies that help release intense emotion. (See Lesson 2 in Appendix B.) Children new to Talk It Out may initially need you to make a direct suggestion: "Why don't you get a drink of water?"

Eventually you can encourage children to assess their emotional state and choose a strategy on their own.

Teacher: Are you ready to Talk It Out now or do you need more time to cool off?
Child: I need more time.
Teacher: What would help you feel better?

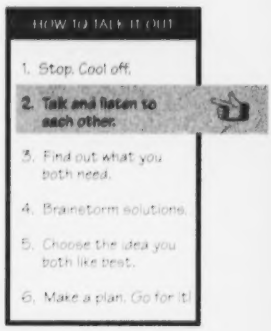
Gather Information

Kaitlin cannot solve her problem until she understands what the problem is. The cool-off step also allows you to gather information and help the child define the problem. Clarifying questions are useful in figuring out what happened.

Me: Does Tasha know you want to play with her?
Kaitlin: (sniffing) Yes. I asked her this morning and she said yes. And now she's playing with Jennifer.

Be careful that your questions do not put the child on the defensive. Children initially assume you are trying to decide who is right and wrong. The question "Why won't Tasha play with you?" might cause Kaitlin to argue, "I didn't do anything. She's just mean." The reason Tasha won't play with Kaitlin is important in understanding the problem. But that's a question for Tasha later. Once Kaitlin has sorted through her feelings and put her experience into words, she is ready for the next step.

Step 2: Talk and Listen to Each Other


HOW TO TALK IT OUT
1. Stop. Cool off.
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5. Choose the idea you both like best.
6. Make a plan. Go for it!

In the second step, Kaitlin and Tasha took turns talking about the problem and listening to one another. I facilitated the dialogue by working with one child at a time, beginning with Kaitlin, who first reported the conflict. I asked her what happened, restated the information, and, when Kaitlin shared upsetting feelings, encouraged her to express them to Tasha. Cuing Kaitlin to "start with I" reminded her to use the I-message, the assertive speaking skill we had learned in Lesson 3 (also in Appendix B).

Me: Can you tell Tasha how you feel? Start with I. Say, "Tasha, I . . ."
Kaitlin: (turning to Tasha) Tasha, I feel mad when you won't play with me.
Me: Thanks, Kaitlin.

At this point, Tasha may feel accused and defensive. I was careful, then, to explore her perspective using the same questions and neutral tone of voice I used with Kaitlin.

Me: Now, Tasha it's your turn. What happened?
Tasha: Well, Jennifer asked me first so I had to play with her.

Me: So Jennifer asked you to play before Kaitlin.

Tasha: Yeah. Jennifer asked me yesterday.

Me: Let's see if I understand. Jennifer asked you yesterday, Kaitlin asked you today, and you said yes to both girls. How are you feeling right now?

Tasha: Kinda bad. Cuz I don't want Kaitlin to be mad at me.

Me: So it's important that you stay friends with Kaitlin. Well, when Kaitlin asked you to play this morning, did you want to play with her?

Tasha: Yah.

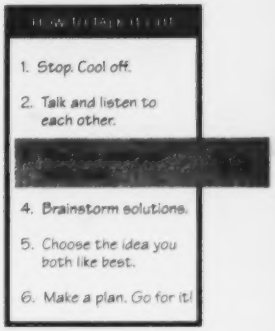
It sometimes happens that the second person wants to communicate information rather than strong emotions, in which case an I-message isn't needed. In order for Kaitlin's hurt feelings to be soothed, she needed to find out that Tasha really did want to play with her. I invited Tasha to tell her this directly.

Me: Would you tell her that?

Tasha: (to Kaitlin) I really did want to play with you, Kaitlin. It's just that Jennifer asked me first.

This facilitated dialogue is important rehearsal for improved communication between the girls in the future. With enough guided practice, Tasha and Kaitlin eventually will be able to talk about their problem without my help.

Step 3: Find Out What You Both Need


1. Stop. Cool off.
2. Talk and listen to each other.
4. Brainstorm solutions.
5. Choose the idea you both like best.
6. Make a plan. Go for it!

The primary goal of Step 2 is to gather enough information to reframe the problem in terms of what both children need. Needs are different from positions. A "position" is what we say we want. "Interests" or "needs" are the reasons we want it. It is easier to find mutually satisfying solutions when we focus on interests rather than positions.

Asking yourself the question "Why?" sometimes helps identify underlying needs. Why do Kaitlin and Tasha take their positions? Kaitlin wants Tasha to play with her right now, but her underlying need or interest is in maintaining her friendship with Tasha. Tasha wants to play with Kaitlin at another time (so she can finish playing with Jennifer), but Tasha's underlying need or interest is for Kaitlin not to be mad at her and to play with her in the future. When I helped the girls look beyond their initial positions and understand their larger interest in remaining friends, many solutions were possible, some of which satisfied them both.

Sometimes, as with Kaitlin and Tasha, the disputants have a common interest.

Me: (to both) So, it sounds like you both need a chance to play together, is that right?

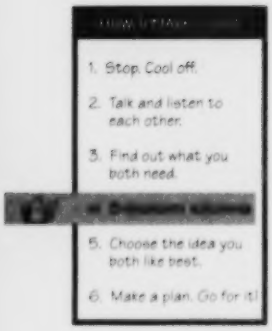
Pointing out their shared concern helped the girls reconcile hurt feelings and work together in the next step to find an agreeable solution. At other times children don't have an obvious common concern. Then, the problem statement must include the interests of both. The observation "So, it sounds like Jason needs an eraser and Elena needs for people to ask before taking her things" reframes the situation in terms of what both children need.

Identifying children's underlying needs requires us to look more closely than we ordinarily do. We tend to get stuck in the same superficial perception of the problem as the one held by children: either Tasha plays with Kaitlin now and Kaitlin wins, or Tasha plays with Kaitlin later and Tasha wins. Restating children's initial positions, however, only reinforces the situation as irreconcilable. A true "needs" statement elicits nods from both children and leads to a solution in which everybody wins.

Another common mistake is to inadvertently advance your favorite solution in the statement of needs. If Tasha was one who frequently breaks promises, your own frustration might lead you to say something like "So, Kaitlin needs Tasha to play with her now, and Tasha needs to keep her promise." Hearing that, Tasha would feel blamed and reprimanded, a major violation of the Talk It Out approach. If you want to talk to Tasha about the importance of keeping promises that is fine, but do it at another time. Once you begin this process you must remain nonjudgmental and emotionally neutral or children quickly learn that Talk It Out is a fancy new way of getting into trouble.

It is actually better to omit the statement of need altogether than to propose a solution in which only one person can win. When in doubt, skip this step and begin the brainstorm with an open-ended question: "How can

you solve the problem so that you're both happy?" Children will naturally press for their needs to be met in the flow of ideas that follows.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Step 4: Brainstorm Solutions

Children get stuck socially because they can think of only one way to solve their problem, and that way is often unskillful: hit back, say something mean, run to the teacher and get someone in trouble. In the brainstorm step, children learn that if they take time to think, there are countless ways to solve a problem.

Brainstorming is a creative thinking tool. It encourages risk taking, increases fluency of ideas, and promotes divergent thinking. Brainstorming works best when participants come up with many ideas as quickly as possible with no comments.

Come Up With Many Ideas

The first idea children offer is often the most obvious: "Do it my way." My way is usually a position that demands the other person do all the changing. Tasha's first idea was for Kaitlin to wait until tomorrow. Though this solution doesn't address Kaitlin's needs, we can't expect Tasha to be more creative until her favorite solution has been acknowledged as one possibility.

It sometimes isn't until the third, fourth, or even fifth idea that children become creative enough to develop solutions that satisfy everyone. Thus the importance of generating a pool of ideas.

As Quickly as Possible

A quick pace helps children stay focused on the job of developing solutions. Given too much time, children tend to wander off the subject. When that happens, briefly acknowledge the other concerns and return children's attention to the task at hand.

Kaitlin: *Yah, and you know what else? Yesterday Tasha took my pencil. And before that she called me a name.*

Me: *So, you have other problems with Tasha. We can talk about those another time. Right now we are thinking of ways you and Tasha can play together. Do you have another idea?*

See Appendix D p. 134

Keep track of ideas by counting them on fingers or by writing them on a scrap of paper or the Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet (Appendix D). Recording ideas validates good thinking and encourages children to come up with more. When you handle the job of remembering, children can fully concentrate on thinking.

Playing the role of recorder also helps you stay focused on your job: remaining neutral and keeping the process moving. If you are busy capturing children's ideas on paper you are less likely to slip and offer a favorite solution of your own.

No Comments

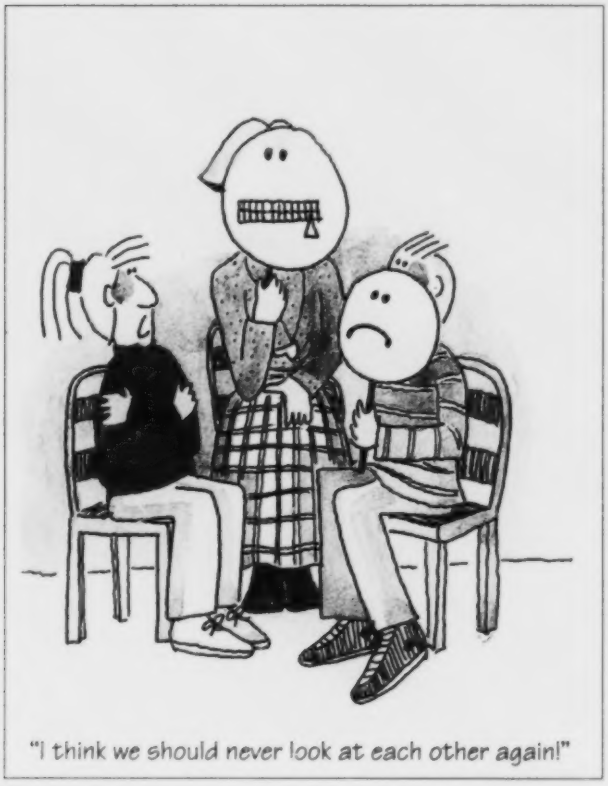
If we want children to think freely, they must feel safe from ridicule, criticism, and punishment. Comments like "That's dumb!" or "No way!" inhibit creativity and escalate hostile feelings. Hold strictly to the rule that all ideas are acceptable, without comment or judgment. If children forget, remind them that their ideas will be discussed and evaluated in the next step.

Me: Let's see if you can think of four ways you can get together and play. Who has an idea?

Tasha: I could play with Kaitlin tomorrow.

Kaitlin: No! I want to play today!

Me: Kaitlin, remember the rules of brainstorming? First we come up with lots of ideas. Then, in the next step we'll find out how you feel about the ideas. Okay. Tasha and Kaitlin play tomorrow. That's one idea. (I hold up one finger and continue keeping track as more ideas are named.) Who has another idea?



"I think we should never look at each other again!"

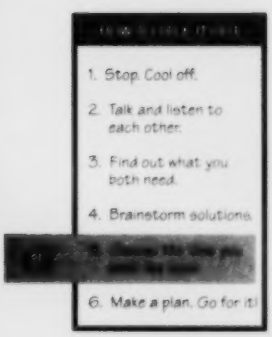
Be careful not to slip and break the "no comments" rule yourself. When children suggest unrealistic solutions, it is hard to stay quiet and nonjudgmental. If Kaitlin suggested that Tasha play with her after the bell rings, you might be tempted to remind her that there's no playing after recess. Although this may be true, your comment, like the children's, belongs in the next step.

It is also difficult to refrain from saying no to unacceptable solutions. If Kaitlin suggested "push Tasha down" as a solution, you might feel obliged to remind Kaitlin that hurtful solutions are inappropriate. A lecture at this time, however, would only turn Kaitlin off to the brainstorm, the process, and to you. Meanwhile, Tasha may feel you are siding with her.

Hurtful solutions are of course unacceptable, and no doubt Kaitlin knows she may not hurt Tasha. Her "pushing" idea may be more an expression of how angry she feels than a serious suggestion for a solution. If the teacher simply accepts Kaitlin's hurtful idea along with the others (understanding that acknowledgment of an idea does not imply approval), Kaitlin's anger may dissipate and she will be free to be more creative. After all, pushing is one possible solution. It won't, however, lead to the happy ending we seek.

If Kaitlin's next two ideas are "pull Tasha's hair" and "tell everyone in the class Tasha is mean," Kaitlin is probably still too angry to engage in productive brainstorming. Creative thinking ability flies in the face of intense emotion. Provide Kaitlin with more cooling-off time or return to the second step and give Kaitlin a chance to express her feelings about Tasha in a more direct and appropriate way.

Me: *It sounds like you're still angry about what happened. Tell us again what's upsetting you. Tell Tasha how you are feeling. Start with I. . . . Is there anything else you want Tasha to understand?*



Step 5: Choose the Idea You Both Like Best

Now it's time for the children to select the idea (or ideas) that is agreeable to both. If the list is short, a brief discussion is often enough. I opened the dialogue between Tasha and Kaitlin with the question "Which idea do you both like?" Kaitlin nominated her favorite idea, and I asked Tasha if that was acceptable.

Me: *Now, which idea do you both like?*
Kaitlin: *Playing next recess.*
Me: *Does that idea work for you, Tasha?*

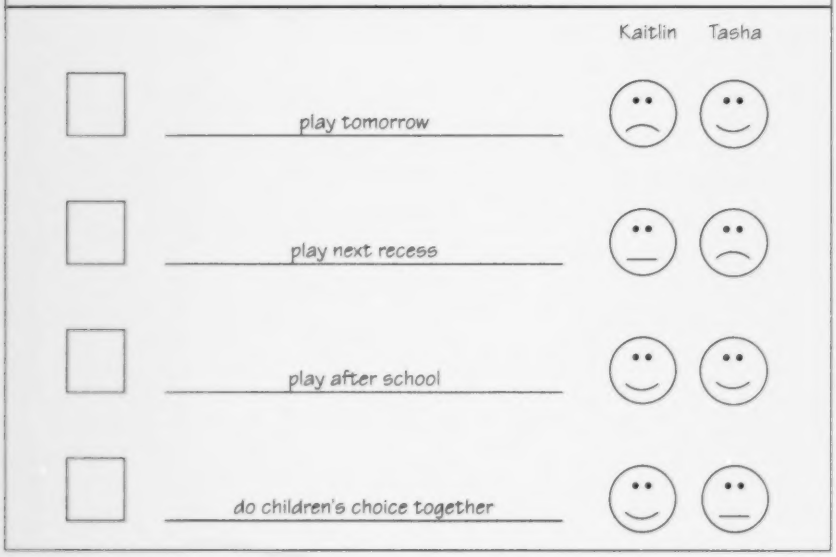
Back and forth the conversation moves, with one child suggesting an idea and the other responding until an agreement is reached. Sometimes the favored solution combines a few ideas or is a completely new idea, as with Tasha and Kaitlin.

Tasha: *Well, Jennifer and I were going to finish playing then.*
Kaitlin: *Can I play too?*
Tasha: *Okay.*

Once I got the ball rolling, the girls were able to arrive at a solution without much additional help from me.

A more concrete way to evaluate ideas is to record children's responses on paper. Beside each idea, indicate how each child feels, as shown in Figure 2.1.

FIGURE 2.1
Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet

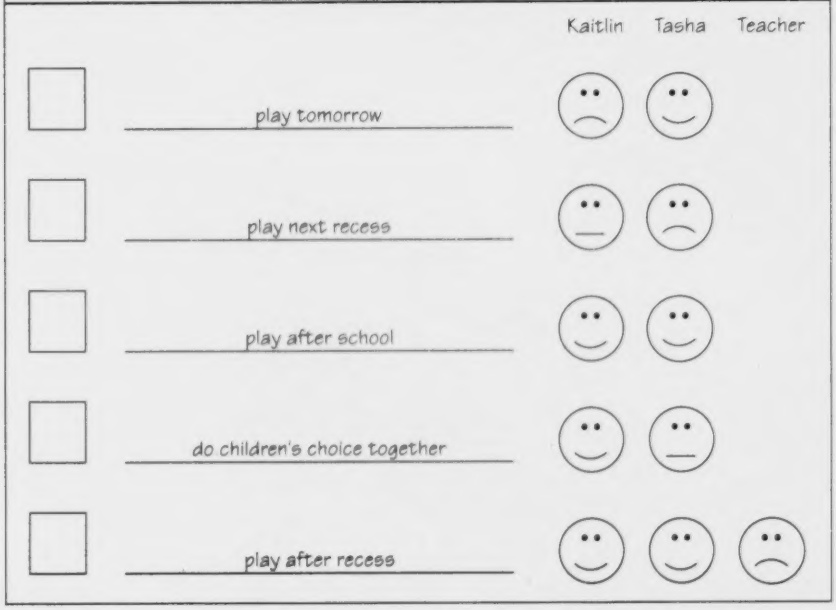


Three responses are possible: "Yes, I like the idea"; "No, I don't like the idea"; and "Maybe the idea is okay." Another possibility is to use "feeling faces"—a smile for yes, a frown for no, and a straight for maybe.

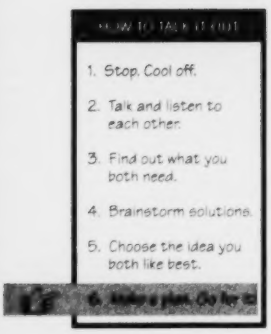
Two smiles clearly mark the win-win solutions, and the rest of the ideas, including any hurtful or unfair ones, are eliminated without a lecture from you. When more than one idea receives two smiles, ask, "Which idea do you want to try first?" or "Which of these ideas do you want to include in your plan?" If no ideas receive two smiles, find an idea that is closest to a win-win solution (probably one that received a smile and a straight line) and ask how the idea might be changed so that it works better for both.

Some solutions involve a third person and cannot be adopted until that person is consulted. For example, Jennifer would have to give her consent before the idea involving her would work. If the favorite idea involves you, here is the time to comment. If Tasha and Kaitlin chose to play after recess and that is not acceptable to you, add your name at the top as shown in Figure 2.2 on the next page, draw a frown in the new column, and briefly explain, "I can't let you stay on the playground after recess. What's your next best idea?" The unacceptable idea is tossed out and the search for a win-win solution continues.

FIGURE 2.2
Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet



Recording ideas and evaluating them with feeling faces is a concrete way to show children there are many ways to solve a problem, some of which work well for everyone involved. As children become familiar with the process of brainstorming and evaluating, they may eventually be able to list ideas and fill in the faces without your help.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Step 6: Make a Plan and Go For It

Once children have selected an idea they both like, summarize the solution and move to the last step—turning the idea into an action plan.

Me: So you both like the idea that Kaitlin joins Tasha and Jennifer when they play next recess.

Finally an agreement has been reached. "Are we done yet?" the children may well ask. Not quite. If the problem is to be solved, the children must actually do what they agreed upon. Though this may seem obvious to us, most children don't know how to turn an idea into an action. Young children even think that simply naming a solution settles the matter. Solutions are abstract for children unless they are translated into concrete plans. For that, they may initially need help.

It would no doubt be quicker and easier to tell Tasha and Kaitlin what they need to do in order to succeed: "Now Tasha, go and ask Jennifer if Kaitlin can

join. If she says no, play with Kaitlin tomorrow instead." If we tell children what to think, however, we again miss an opportunity to teach children how to think. Although guiding children to think for themselves may initially take a bit more time, it pays well in the long run. With enough guided practice, children will eventually be able to figure out how to make plans without your help.

To assist children in developing a plan, ask open-ended questions that identify the steps they will need to take. The more specific the plan, the better.

Me: So you both like the idea that Kaitlin joins Tasha and Jennifer when they play next recess. For that idea to work, what needs to happen first?

Tasha: I have to tell Jennifer.

Me: Any ideas about what three girls can play?

Kaitlin: We could play jump rope.

Tasha: Okay.

Me: What if Jennifer says she wants to play with Tasha by herself?

Tasha: Then I could play with Kaitlin tomorrow.

Kaitlin: During the long recess.

Me: So, the plan is that Tasha will check with Jennifer and see if she'll play jump rope with Kaitlin next recess. And if that doesn't work, Tasha will play with Kaitlin during lunch recess tomorrow. Is the problem solved?

Both: Yeah.

Tasha and Kaitlin's plan has a good chance of succeeding because they have carefully thought out the details. As they answered the questions, they also rehearsed the plan in their mind. Tasha visualized talking to Jennifer about including Kaitlin. Kaitlin and Tasha "saw" themselves playing jump rope with Jennifer.

Other questions may be helpful in developing a specific action plan:

- What needs to happen first?
- Then what?
- How are you going to . . . ?
- Who will be responsible for . . . ?
- Where? When?
- If that doesn't work, what will you do then?

Pay special attention to those parts of the plan that are likely to break down. I asked the girls to think of an activity that three girls would enjoy because the girls in my class have difficulty playing in triads. I knew that Jennifer might say no to Tasha's request to include Kaitlin, so I asked the girls to figure out a back-up plan. If Tasha were a child who habitually forgets, I might have asked, "How will you help yourself remember your agreement to play with Kaitlin tomorrow?" This not only prevents potential problems but also allows me to tailor the plan to meet children's special needs.

Sometimes children choose a solution that is unrealistic. If Tasha and Kaitlin decided never to speak to each other again, you would certainly want

to ask a "reality check" question: "Do you think you cannot speak to each other at school where you spend so much time in the same room?"

If both students agree enthusiastically to an unrealistic solution, however, allow them to proceed and learn from the experience. Failed solutions teach valuable lessons—that the first idea doesn't always work and that when one idea fails, a better one can be found. Save the idea list so children can return to it later if necessary.

When an agreement has been reached, close the session by summarizing the plan and checking to see if the problem has been solved. Congratulations are in order when both children agree.

Me: So, the plan is that Tasha will check with Jennifer and see if she'll play jump rope with Kaitlin next recess. And if that doesn't work, Tasha will play with Kaitlin during lunch recess tomorrow. Is the problem solved?

Both: Yeah.

Me: Congratulations! You worked hard to find a solution.

When children first begin to Talk It Out, it is helpful to check in later and ask, "How did your solution work?" Eventually you can trust that if the conflict was resolved, you won't hear about it again. If not, an unhappy child will appear at your side asking for more assistance.

Talk It Out Tips

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind as you guide children through the problem-solving process.

- **Stay out of it!** Your goal is to give students the practice they need to become independent problem solvers. Offer children only as much help as they need to be successful. Remember, the problem belongs to the children, and they are the best ones to figure out a solution that will truly satisfy their needs. The process belongs to you. Your job is to provide children with a structure for solving their problems and the opportunity to do it. Whether it gets solved and how it gets solved is up to the children.

- **Remain nonjudgmental.** Blaming, lecturing, and advising are not appropriate for the facilitator. Think of yourself as a friendly, neutral guide leading children through a process that has no right answers. If you are able to do this, children will feel supported as they search for answers of their own.

- **Keep the process moving. Maintain focus.** Keep children focused on the problem and the process of developing a solution. If children blame and say they didn't start it, tell them, "I don't care who started it. Right now we are looking for a solution that will make you both happy." If they get sidetracked into naming other conflicts, say, "I see there've been other problems. We can talk about those another time. Right now we're solving the problem with the ball."

- **Use the Facilitator's Script.** Old habits die hard. It is especially difficult to remember a new approach in the hurried pace of classroom life. Until you've

mastered your new role, refer to the Facilitator's Script in Appendix C when you meet with students to Talk It Out. As you reach for the script, tell students you are learning it along with them. They may be motivated to participate even more when they realize that they are learning something so new to grown-ups. Soon they'll be looking over your shoulder and memorizing your part. Eventually they won't need your help at all.

"It's my conflict and I'll resolve it if I want to!"

3 Creating the Conflict Corner

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.
— Lao-tzu

Now it is mid-October. After recess I am ready to kick off our study of animals with a fun art activity. The children, however, are not about to settle down. Three are whining in my face about name-calling, cutting in line, and breaking soccer rules. Four more are waiting in the wings to report their complaints. There is always a backlog of problems after lunch, and I always feel the same frustration. Though I have spent several weeks leading children in conflict through the process, they continue asking for help. Our hard work has yet to pay off. "I want to Talk It Out!" has simply replaced the old chorus of tattled tales. How long will it take children to solve problems on their own?

I decide to postpone the art activity and share my dilemma. I ask everyone to sit.

"I have a problem, and I need your help. After lunch I wanted to start an art project, and seven of you wanted to Talk It Out. If I take the time to help you resolve those conflicts, it's not fair to the children who are ready for art.

How can we give people a chance to Talk It Out and still have time for other important work?"

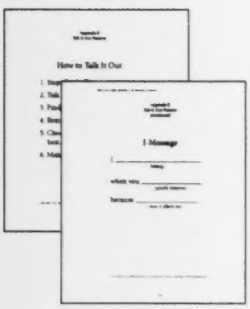
Just stating the problem in terms of need and asking for the children's help offers some relief. A month ago I would have made an executive decision—a firm statement that we don't have time to talk about problems now. But I have since learned the value of involving the children with problems concerning them.

We explore a few possibilities. My favorite, of course, is for the children to solve their problems on their own. But the children insist they still need help moving through the steps. I am happy to offer help, I explain, but only for a limited time each day.

"In fact," I inform them, "I only feel comfortable using about 10 or 15 minutes each day solving social problems."

After an involved discussion, we settle on a plan. Talk It Out time will take place for 15 minutes after lunch. Whoever wants a turn to talk signs a list and waits to be called. The rest of the students will use the time to write in their journals, an activity that used to take place in the morning.

Conflict Corner Protocol

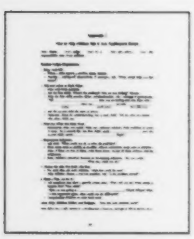


See Appendix E
p. 135–136

Next we establish a place in the room where Talk It Out will take place. We call it the Conflict Corner, though it really isn't a corner. In this space tucked behind a bookcase near the back of the room, I post the six steps, an I-message chart reminding children about the assertive speaking skill, and a sign-up sheet (see Appendix E).

After settling the class into journal writing, I consult the sign-up sheet and ask the first child listed if he still wants a turn to Talk It Out. Though most children eagerly await their turn, some answer no. The issue is either no longer a problem or the child has simply forgotten why he signed up. When a child declines, I congratulate him for handling the problem himself.

When a child answers yes, I ask for the name of the other disputant, approach the second child, and invite her to join us in the Corner. This self-referral system, in which a child signs her name only, works better than having the child write both names on the list. Publicly posting the names of the feuding duo often solidifies the conflict in everyone's mind and escalates hostile feelings. There's more room for change if the child requesting help doesn't initially identify who she is upset with.



See Appendix C
p. 133

On the way to the Corner, I pull three chairs together and arrange them in a triangle so we can make eye contact and speak directly to one another. Sitting is more relaxed than standing and puts me on the same level as the children. I am not the authority figure waiting to hand down right answers. I set a timer for 15 minutes and reach for the Facilitator's Script (Appendix C) hanging on a clipboard in the Corner. Now I can give my full attention to helping children find answers of their own.

So Many Conflicts, So Little Time

Once an official time, place, and procedure for handling conflict is established, the class scrambles to sign up. It is like a new toy, with everyone eagerly lining up for a turn. Some children even make up problems so they won't be left out! There is no way I can handle so many problems in so short a time.

I predict that as soon as the newness wears off and children discover that Talk It Out is more work than play, the curious children will lose interest and the Corner will be free for children who genuinely want help solving real problems. Even then, however, children cannot realistically expect every little disagreement to be handled in a formal session. The most the Conflict Corner can offer is help resolving a few of their problems each week.

In the interest of fairness, we decide that people will not have a second turn in the Conflict Corner until everyone has had a first chance to Talk It Out. Children with multiple problems will need to prioritize their concerns and select the problem that is most important.

"But what about the problems that can't be handled in the Corner?" the children ask. We think about the question together and decide that if children cannot wait for a turn in the Conflict Corner, they have two choices: they can ignore the problem and hope it goes away or they can ask me to handle it. The third option, of course, is that they Talk It Out without my help, an idea that is still out of reach—and the reason, I keep reminding myself, I am going to all this trouble.

A Structure for Respectful Communication

The process does not always go as smoothly as the script suggests. Children new to Talk It Out continually press to move the dialogue in a more familiar direction. Years of experience dealing with conflict the old way have convinced many that where there's conflict, there's trouble. The best way to avoid getting into trouble is to prove to the teacher you are right and the other person is wrong.

Many early attempts to Talk It Out break down with that old, familiar finger-pointing refrain:

"He started it."
"I did not!"
"Did so!"
"Did not!"
"It's all your fault!"
"Is not!"
"Is too!"

At first when things get out of hand, I am completely unnerved and slip, with the children, into doing business the old way. I settle them down with a lecture and, since they can't cooperate, impose my own solution.

It doesn't take many shouting matches, however, before I remember about ground rules. Ground rules, I had been taught, guarantee respectful commu-

nication by prohibiting antagonistic behavior. The ground rules used in most conflict resolution programs include these three: treat each other with respect, do not interrupt, and work to solve the problem. When everybody follows the rules, respectful communication is assured, and mutually satisfying solutions are possible. When the rules are broken, as in the dialogue above, the process quickly falls apart.

See Appendix E p. 137

If I want children to follow the rules, each rule and its importance must be fully explored. I make a poster of the rules (Appendix E) and wait for a chance to add them to Conflict Corner protocol.

"As some of you may have noticed," I begin, "Talk It Out doesn't work when people break these rules. The first rule is treat each other with respect. What does it mean to treat someone with respect?"

The children decide that being respectful means you can't name-call, blame, or put each other down. Body language can also be disrespectful. Sticking your tongue out, for example, would only make the problem worse.

To demonstrate the importance of the rule, I ask two children to make up a conflict and, in a skit, call each other names as they describe a dispute. It's not hard for students to see how name-calling escalates hostilities and leads to more fighting.

The role-players present a second skit using nonthreatening language and find that although it is more difficult to speak respectfully, it is nonetheless a more effective way to communicate. The I-message formula we had learned is especially helpful in talking about a problem without criticizing or blaming the other person.

The second and third rules are introduced in the same way, first with a discussion of the rule's meaning and then with a wrong-way/right-way skit. I end the lesson with a simple statement: "I'll post these rules in the Conflict Corner. Only people who follow them are welcome to Talk It Out."

The Benefits of Rules

The rules, I discover, cover a multitude of sins and make it easier to keep children headed in a productive direction. Calling for respectful behavior prohibits hurtful names, threats, and all forms of "It's all your fault!" Eliminating interruptions means each child gets a chance to tell his side of the story and feel heard and cared about. This action alone is often enough to defuse hostile feelings and move children toward reconciliation. The third rule, requiring children to come to the Corner with the intention of solving the problem, insists they take the process seriously and follow through with their agreements. If I am alert enough to stop children when they break the rules, the six steps have a chance to work and peace is indeed possible.

The rules also help me maintain control without getting emotionally involved. When children take a wrong turn, I simply name the rule that has been broken. A quick reminder or simply pointing to the rule on the poster often is enough to bring children back to task.

A few children, however, are not so easily controlled. Their belief that only one person can be right coupled with their old urgent need to avoid "getting into trouble" compels them to interrupt whenever they disagree. If, after several reminders, children continue interrupting, I end the session and suggest they take more time to cool off and try again later.

Sometimes it is possible to prevent the rule-breaking problem altogether by reviewing the rules beforehand and asking for a commitment to follow them. This is time well spent with children who are predictably hot-tempered and difficult to manage.

Perhaps the most effective way to convince children to follow the rules is a successful firsthand experience in the Conflict Corner. Once children realize I am not gathering information to assign blame and dish out punishment, they are better able to wait their turn and participate respectfully. With repeated practice, children eventually discover that it is possible for two people to disagree and still be "right" in their way of seeing something and that it is only by understanding and accepting two different perspectives that people can develop solutions to address everyone's needs.

Some Children Aren't Ready

There are times, I discover, when Talk It Out simply doesn't work. Even when children follow the rules and come up with workable solutions, their solutions fail and the problems recur. My own sense of frustration alerts me to the fact that a few children are not ready to participate responsibly. They are not taking the process seriously and are misusing Conflict Corner time. When children are unable to solve their problems, it is up to me to step in and handle the situation myself.

Rosa, for example, had the annoying habit of bothering people around her. She would touch their things, tap out rhythms with her pencil, and make disruptive noises. Each time children Talked It Out with Rosa, she earnestly said she would stop. Yet Rosa's annoying behavior persisted. When reminded about her agreement to stop, Rosa shrugged her shoulders and said, "I forgot."

Because Rosa was unable to follow through with her agreement, the problem-solving approach was not an effective way of handling the situation. I experimented with a variety of interventions until I hit on one that worked. I provided Rosa with a "Koosh" ball to play with at her desk. This kept her hands busy in a nondisruptive way. And because she could keep the toy only if she did not bother people around her, she was more motivated to "remember."

Eddie habitually cut in line. When classmates communicated their dismay, Eddie's quick comeback was, "Sorry." Although his apology helped soothe upset feelings in the moment, it wasn't long before Eddie repeated the same annoying behavior. Eddie, too, was going through the motions of problem solving without taking it seriously. Because he was unwilling to change his behavior, I had to solve the problem another way. I told Eddie that whenever he cut in line, he would have to go to the end of the line.

Brittney, Vanessa, and Rochelle had problems every day. It seemed they could never agree upon who should play with whom. After lengthy Talk It Out sessions, I realized the three girls were not really working to solve the problem; they were enjoying keeping things stirred up. The next time the problem reappeared, I let the girls know that since their solutions hadn't lasted very long, I couldn't let them take more time in the Conflict Corner. The third rule—work to solve the problem—implies that they work to solve the problem for good. I offered them a choice: "You can take three minutes right now to decide how you will play together next recess or I will assign you play partners." They came up with a plan in no time at all.

Michael was my toughest customer. He had a history of teasing and was well practiced in the avoidance strategy. Each time a classmate confronted him about his hurtful behavior, he flatly denied having done anything wrong.

My initial instinct was to ask for witnesses and strengthen the case against Michael. But that strategy only made him angrier and pushed him deeper into denial. Eventually I hit upon an effective response: "I don't know what happened. I wasn't there. Right now Hannah wants you to listen to something that is important to her. After she speaks, I want you to tell me what you heard her say."

To Hannah I say, "This time tell Michael you get angry when people make fun of your freckles."

Hannah nods and repeats the generic I-message: "Michael, I don't like it when people make fun of my freckles."

"But I didn't!" snaps Michael.

"Tell me what you heard Hannah say, Michael," I reply.

Michael mumbles, "She doesn't like people making fun of her freckles. But I didn't."

"I'm glad you didn't because Hannah really hates it. If Hannah or anyone else complains about you hurting feelings today, we'll have to talk after school."

Michael's credibility is used up within the hour. The rest of the day he sits by my side, and after school we Talk It Out. The process we use is the same process used in the Conflict Corner to settle disputes between students, only this time I am one of the disputants. We come up with a plan in which Michael agrees to stop saying mean things. If he slips and hurts someone's feelings again, he will repair the hurt by doing one nice thing for the person in return. (A detailed description of how to resolve teacher-student conflicts using the Talk It Out process is the subject of Chapter 8.)

The children described above lost the privilege of using the Conflict Corner until they were able to participate responsibly. If Talk It Out time is going to sharpen children's peacemaking skills, it is up to me to reserve the Corner for those who genuinely want help finding solutions to real problems and following through with their agreements.

Common Questions About the Conflict Corner

What other challenges can you expect when establishing a Conflict Corner in your room? The following questions and answers provide guidance on some of the most common issues.

1. There seem to be more conflicts now than before I introduced conflict resolution. When will they diminish? Unfortunately, things may get worse before they get better. Now that you have opened up this interesting topic, all your students may suddenly remember a problem they need to solve. In fact, children need to focus on conflict in order to learn peacemaking skills. Remind children that the purpose of Talk It Out time is not to handle every little thing that goes wrong, but to give them the practice they need to become independent problem solvers. You might try hanging a roll sheet in the Conflict Corner (instead of the sign-up sheet) and telling children you'll let them know when it's their turn. Limiting children's use of the Corner may help them discriminate between minor irritations that are best ignored and big problems that warrant the time and attention it takes to problem solve. Other ideas about how to help children ignore petty problems are found in Chapter 10.

Remember, too, the goal of this or any conflict resolution program is not to eliminate conflict. That would be impossible. As long as there are humans in your room with unique personalities and differing needs, you are going to

"There's no conflict in MY classroom."

have conflict. We would hope, however, that as soon as children have a few successful experiences resolving conflicts with your help, they will become more independent of you. Chapters 4 and 5 talk about how to refer children to their own resourcefulness and support them so they can eventually solve problems on their own.

2. What if I'm too angry to be a nonjudgmental facilitator? If you're angry about what happened and know you can't be neutral, tell the children you need time to cool off before you can help them Talk It Out. You are human too, and handling your anger in skillful ways provides a powerful model for children.

When immediate action is necessary, as with an emergency, take a few deep breaths and reach for a quicker strategy. You can give a command, offer choices, or come up with a quick compromise. These strategies are fully discussed in Chapter 11.

3. How does this program serve the "nice" children who go along with whatever other children want? The child who is easily led by others is most afraid of hurting people's feelings and losing friends. The most valuable lesson Talk It Out can teach these children is that it is possible to assert your rights without damaging a relationship. This knowledge is best learned through experience. In Step 2, help accommodating children identify their needs and feelings and express them directly to the other child. In choosing a solution (Step 5), pay attention to the child's body language and tone of voice. If you sense she is going against her own interests tell her, "You said yes, but you don't really look happy about this solution. Are you sure this idea is okay with you? If it isn't, we can think of another."

Children who tend to accommodate are more naturally tuned in to the feelings of others and, once they learn to assert themselves, often come up with the most creative ways to satisfy everyone's needs. The more naturally aggressive children, while more in touch with their desires and at ease expressing them, need extra help expressing their feelings appropriately, listening respectfully to others, and taking responsibility for their behavior.

4. What if the other child refuses to participate? It takes two to Talk It Out. If children are unable to solve their problems, for whatever reason, we must step in and solve them ourselves. Ask the willing child to give the other an I-message, and when the second child thwarts the process, close the session and provide solutions of your own. For a detailed account, read about Dennis in Chapter 9.

5. What about conflicts involving three or more children? Talk It Out works with any number as long as everyone has a chance to participate and have their needs addressed in the solution. The more children who participate, however, the more complicated and time-consuming the process becomes. Often, when several children report a conflict, there are really only two sides to the story, with children standing in support of each side. It is easier to conduct the process with one representative from each group. In the last step, ask the two to decide how they will inform others about their plan.

Or, in the case of two (or more) children against one, announce that Talk It Out works best with two. Who wants to go first? Although it takes time to work with disputants two at a time, this approach helps the one child feel safe and not "ganged up on."

6. Many of my children don't have any ideas about how to solve their problems. Can I offer them suggestions? When first asked to come up with ideas, children commonly shrug their shoulders. Brainstorming solutions to social problems is so new, many children honestly can't think of any ideas. Some children believe there is only one right answer—the teacher's—and begin the familiar guessing game of trying to name the answer you have in mind. After all, that is the position in which we often place children: to come up with our right answer.

Explicitly tell students that, unlike spelling, there's more than one way to solve the problem, and the two people having the problem are the best ones to think of a way that will work for them. It is tempting to make a suggestion when children are short on ideas. If you offer children a solution, however, their suspicion is confirmed: I can't solve problems without the teacher's help. Better to prime the idea pump with a question like "I wonder what the smartest person in the world would do?" or "What would you tell your friend to do?" You may try suggesting something silly: "We could cut the ball in half and give you each a piece."

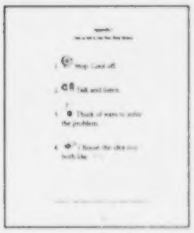
Another possibility is to ask a more specific question. "What can you do about the kicking?" may be more manageable than the huge question "What could you do to solve the problem?" Or limit the number of ideas you are looking for: "Name a couple ways you can both have fun with the ball."

If children still stare blankly, refer them to their classmates, an immediate and appropriate resource for ideas. With young children, a circle of interested bystanders can provide additional brain power. When there is no one standing around (and privacy is important to many children, especially older ones), you might ask the disputants if they are comfortable asking peers for help in a class meeting.

Perhaps the best technique for helping children develop solutions is your own belief that children are capable of coming up with ideas. The message we want to convey is "There are many ways to solve this problem, and I know you two are perfectly capable of finding a solution that is fair." Then, close your mouth and wait. Your expectation plus a sufficient amount of "wait time" will free children to be their most creative selves.

7. Many conflicts seem to be solved without coming up with a solution. Is it necessary to go through all the steps every time? Not at all. Some conflicts are more about reconciling hurt feelings than making a deal. Often children are satisfied with just expressing how they feel and knowing they've been heard. "I don't like it when you call me Hannah Banana!" may be all that Hannah needs to say to in order to feel better.

Follow the children's lead. If they feel complete after an I-message, let the issue go. If the matter still feels unfinished, ask an open-ended question—"Is there anything else that needs to happen?"—to determine your next step.



See Appendix F
p. 138

See Appendix G
p. 139

8. My 5-year-olds can't remember a conflict five minutes later much less for a Conflict Corner time. How can this approach be adapted for kindergarten? The only conflict young children can think about is the one they are having right now. You must be willing to handle kindergartner's problems as they occur or the opportunity is lost. Gently round up the two unhappy children and begin. A simplified four-step poster (with pictures) and a Facilitator's Script for helping young children Talk It Out can be found in Appendix F and Appendix G.

Also, the five-lesson curriculum presented in Appendix B will have to be simplified considerably for young children. You might try skipping the formal lessons altogether. Young children especially learn best by doing and will follow your lead wherever you go.

9. I'm a 5th grade teacher. After presenting the lessons to my students, no one signed up in the Conflict Corner. Does this mean there are no conflicts in my room? Unless your students are very unusual, there are plenty of conflicts brewing just beneath the surface. Figure out why your students are not trying the new approach. Is Conflict Corner time competing with a highly attractive activity? If students can Talk It Out only during recess, many will probably choose to play rather than deal with their problems. Relegating Talk It Out to recess also gives the message that conflict resolution isn't important enough to take up regular school time.

Do your students feel safe? Many older students have learned from experience that when they go to an adult with a problem, either they get into trouble or the other child gets into trouble and they end up being called a tattletale, which is even worse. Saving face with peers is of utmost importance. It may not be cool to show feelings or act like you care. The idea of signing a public list and airing vulnerable feelings within earshot of the class may be unthinkable.

Make the process confidential. Eliminate the sign-up sheet. Protect the privacy of upper-grade students by having them write you a note or put their name in a box to request help. Conduct Talk It Out time outside the door (while the class is working) or wait until the class is out of the room. Add a fourth rule requesting disputants to use confidentiality. These steps will assure students that their personal thoughts and feelings will not become public information.

Finally, to help wary students trust you and the process, provide opportunities for them to see how Talk It Out works. Promote the new approach by featuring a "Conflict of the Day" role-play in which students act out typical conflicts and talk them out in front of the class. As students observe you helping peers turn familiar problems into satisfying solutions, they will eventually feel comfortable enough to try the process themselves.

10. My kids are getting good at solving problems in the classroom, but the minute they go to recess, they seem to forget everything. When can I expect these skills to transfer to the playground? If you want children to Talk It Out on the playground, you must establish there the same supportive environment found in the classroom. That is, everyone in the school—children

from other classes, teachers, supervising adults, and administrators—must be trained in the Talk It Out process and willing to apply those skills whenever conflict occurs. Chapter 12 talks about implementing a schoolwide conflict resolution program.

Notes About Teaching Materials Found in the Appendixes

The three posters for the Conflict Corner—How to Talk It Out, I-message, and Rules— can be found in a larger format in Appendix E. You will also find materials for guiding kindergarten and 1st grade students through the problem-solving process. Appendix F shows a 4-step version of the How to Talk It Out poster with pictures beside each step for nonreaders. Appendix G provides a Facilitator's Script for the simplified process. The mouth and ear sketches have been enlarged in Appendix H for use in your Conflict Corner. Cut them out, attach them to sticks, and ask children to hold them in Step 2 as they take turns talking and listening.

Although the four-step poster was originally developed for young children, it works great with older students as well.

"Here comes Marge, wearing her new paradigm shift."

4

On-the-Spot Problem Solving

Most problems cannot be solved
at the level at which they are asked.
—Zen Koan

Now it is early December, and James and Anthony are playing tug of war with a favorite dinosaur book. I ask for the book. "You can have it back as soon as you have a plan," I whisper. Then I calmly walk away. In less than a minute, they report that the two of them look at the book together and take turns saying when to turn the page.

Kirsten is pestering me about peanut butter. I take a moment to try to change her tune. "Yuk! So, you hate peanut butter, and your dad packed you a peanut butter sandwich?" I mirror her gloomy face. "Hmm. I wonder what you could do?"

"Oh, someone will trade with me," she says brightening. "I got a whole bag of chips!"

While walking to the library, I hear Sam and Margarita exchange angry words. I separate them and ask them to cool off until I get back. After settling the class in the library, I return, ask what happened, and request they give each other an I-message.

Margarita: I don't like it when you step on my heel.

Sam: Well, I don't like it when you walk so slow.

Me: (to both) It sounds like you're both unhappy about the way you were walking in line. What could you do differently so this problem doesn't happen again?

Margarita: You could ask me nicely instead of stepping on me.

Sam: Okay, but you can stop looking at your book and walk faster.

Margarita: I was just trying to finish before we got to the library.

Me: (to Margarita) Can you think of a way you could finish your book that would work better for Sam?

Margarita: I guess I could check it out again.

Me: So Margarita agrees to walk faster, and Sam, do you agree to tell Margarita what you want next time instead of stepping on her heel?

Sam: Yah, okay.

After weeks of practice in the Conflict Corner, I notice the Talk It Out way of handling conflict slip into my own immediate responses to problems. Instead of stepping in and fixing disagreements, I turn them over to the children. The children are more skillful, too. With a little coaching from me, they are able to come up with workable solutions.

Although I continue to meet daily in the Conflict Corner with children who signed up, many more conflicts are handled as they occur, without interrupting the flow of classroom activity. Formal appointments and lengthy sessions are no longer needed to solve most problems. Children like Sam and Margarita have the experience and skill to resolve their conflict on the spot, with minimal assistance from me. Our hard work is finally paying off.

Shift Happens

Although my handling of Sam and Margarita may have initially required a bit more time than my former way of handling the situation, I saved significant time in the long run. Three months ago, Margarita and Sam probably would have continued their fight long after my intervention. But then again, my brief intervention three months ago probably would have sounded more like a reprimand. The old scenario might have gone something like this:

Margarita: (whining) Sam stepped on my heel!

Me: Sam, watch where you're going or you'll have to walk with me!

Sam: It's her fault. She's walking too slow. (I miss Sam's comment because I've already moved to the head of the line. Margarita continues reading in line. Sam steps on her other heel.)

Margarita: (wailing to me) Ms. Forro! He did it again!

Me: Sam! Come up here with me since you can't listen.

Sam: Well, tell her to stop reading!

Me: Margarita, close the book 'til we get to the library.

Sam: (sneering at Margarita) Tattletale! (And with that, the promise to get her later.)

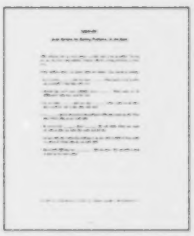
Margarita isn't the only one receiving dirty looks. Sam is also angry with me for blaming him, for not listening to his side of the story, and for making him walk with me, a public embarrassment. He's likely to look for a chance to get me later, too.

So, how is it we were able to resolve the issue in a brief, civilized conversation, when before we would have engaged in lengthy battle? (Sam probably would have found ways to sabotage me all year had I continued blaming him when things went wrong.) The answer is that after weeks of practicing Talking It Out, we saw the situation differently.

I no longer felt compelled to get involved, decide who was right and wrong, and impose a solution. Sam and Margarita were no longer preoccupied with blaming and defending. The conflict simply signaled their need to communicate more effectively and find a better way to handle the situation. My job was to help them be successful. Free from old agendas and scripts, they could quickly get on with the business of finding a solution.

This change in the way we perceived and responded to conflict is nothing short of a significant paradigm shift, a distinctly new way of thinking about old problems. As the mind shifts to a new perspective, powerful insights compel us to think, feel, and act differently. The chart in Figure 4.1 on the next page describes other changes we made as we switched to the new way of thinking.

Once my students and I internalized the new problem-solving approach, the six-step process could be shortened considerably. A few quick questions, as in Appendix I, were often enough to guide children into developing solutions on the spot.



See Appendix I p. 141

How Long Does It Take to Make the Shift?

Weary teachers, hungry for change, are the first to ask how long it takes for children to become independent problem solvers. "Is this worth my time and trouble? Is it really going to work? When can I expect relief from endless problems and tattled tales?"

I wish this process were a panacea that offered instant results. Real change, however, rarely happens so fast. New ideas often encounter resistance, even hostility at first. Older students, versed in the school of hard knocks, will be the first to tell you this process can't work. Their belief that conflict is a contest compels them to react aggressively when threatened by others. The resulting battle produces winners and losers, reinforcing their belief that only one person can win and strengthening their resolve to wage war more effectively. This self-perpetuating cycle is further strengthened in a culture where violence is out of control. For some students, daily life is so heavily steeped in aggression that it seems useless to try to convince them to conduct their lives in any other way.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to change students' minds about conflict before breaking the negative cycle. According to *Conflict Resolution: A Secondary School Curriculum* (Sadalla, Holmberg, and Halligan 1990), we can

FIGURE 4.1
The Shift

There are two ways of approaching conflict—the old way, in which we step in and handle the situation, and the new way, in which we use conflict as opportunities for children to practice problem-solving skills. The chart below describes some of the differences between the two ways.

It takes a conscious effort to make the shift from the old way of handling conflicts to the new way. Lots of unlearning is required for both you and students. Mistakes are to be expected.

Child's Perspective

Old Way	New Way
Child handles conflict by retaliating, withdrawing, or tattling.	Child gets what is wanted by using listening, speaking, and thinking skills.
When "wronged," the child seeks retribution.	When conflict occurs, children want their needs met.
One way to get retribution is to tattle. (Get the other child in trouble.)	Child asks the teacher for help in Talking It Out with the other child.
Child tries to convince the teacher, "I'm right; my classmate is wrong."	Child speaks openly about what happened. Teacher listens and accepts what child says.
Child may lie to avoid getting in trouble.	Child is truthful because no judgments are made.
Child may use anger to get teacher's attention.	Child doesn't have to make a scene because he or she feels heard by the teacher.
Child who tells teacher about the conflict is called "tattletale," and the conflict continues.	When both children get what they need (and no one gets in trouble), there is no need to retaliate.

Teacher's Perspective

Old Way	New Way
Teacher perceives conflict as an interruption of learning.	Teacher perceives conflict as a teachable moment to practice peacemaking skills.
Teacher feels pressured to fix problems quickly and return to the lesson.	Teacher refers problems to scheduled Talk It Out time and returns to the lesson.
Teacher handles the situation.	Teacher does not solve the problem but teaches children how to solve it themselves.
Teacher gets worn out handling all the tattled tales.	Teacher reframes tattled tales as requests for help and refers children to Talk It Out time later.
Teacher tells child, "Don't tattle."	Teacher teaches child how to ask for help.
Teacher lectures.	Teacher asks child, "How can you solve this?"
Teacher focuses on the past (who did what).	Teacher focuses on future (how to succeed).

(continued)

FIGURE 4.1—*(continued)*
The Shift

Old Way	*New Way*
Teacher focuses on the child (who's wrong).	Teacher focuses on the problem (what's wrong) and remains nonjudgmental. Teacher accepts both children's stories as valid.
Teacher tells "wrongdoer" to apologize.	Teacher asks child, "What would make the situation better for you?"
Teacher delivers negative consequences to misbehaving child.	When appropriate, the teacher presents a logical consequence that helps the unskillful child succeed in the future.

Values and Beliefs

Old Way	*New Way*
Conflict is bad.	Conflict is natural. How we respond to conflict results in either negative or positive outcomes.
Children need adults to solve their problems.	Children are responsible and capable of solving their own problems.
It is not okay to make mistakes.	It's human to make mistakes. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.
When problems occur, someone is to blame.	When problems occur, we seek solutions.
There is only one right way.	There are many ways of perceiving. There are many ways to solve problems.
It's not all right to be angry or frustrated.	It's human to be angry and frustrated when problems arise. There are respectful ways to express these feelings.
A misbehaving child needs to be punished in order to learn.	An unskillful child needs encouragement, guidance, and skills. Children do better when they feel better.
Competition is a good way to motivate children.	Competition leads to conflict. Cooperation builds trust and helps children achieve academically and develop deeper relationships.

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establish a positive pattern by altering students' behavior first. If we prohibit fighting in school and take the time to teach students to settle disputes using peaceful means, they will have the skills they need to make a new choice. If we then insist that students handle conflict the new way and support them to be successful, they will experience new outcomes that will eventually change their beliefs. Children will discover firsthand that winning does not necessarily come at the expense of the other person. They'll discover that if they communicate their upsetting feelings respectfully, it is possible to come up with solutions that satisfy everyone.

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UH, MOM, IT'S REALLY HARD TO HEAR YOU WHEN YOU USE THAT TONE OF VOICE.
OOOO I THINK I LIKED IT BETTER BEFORE CONFLICT RESOLUTION.

5

Moving Toward Independent Problem Solving

Jennifer is upset and heading my way when she catches my eye and stops. "Oh, yeah," she remembers, turning around. "I'm supposed to give 'em an I-message."

By late January, Talk It Out has become as much a part of our daily routine as cleanup. At times I am able to bring the two disputing children together and help them solve their problem as it occurs. During busier moments, we postpone Talk It Out until the regularly scheduled time. Because most children have developed skill in the process, we quickly move through 3 or 4 conflicts in the 15-minute period.

There is also evidence of something new. Although there are still sign-ups each day, many children report their problem no longer exists when Talk It Out time arrives. How curious. Are children forgetting why they signed up, or are they solving their conflicts on their own? After a little investigating I discover that although some skirmishes are too minor to be memorable, a

number of children are solving problems without my assistance. Here's how it worked with Booker and Kevin.

Booker races in from recess, stomps over to the Conflict Corner, and signs up. Next he informs Kevin, "I signed up to Talk It Out."

"Why?" Kevin asks, a little worried.

"Because you wouldn't let me pitch," Booker reminds him.

Kevin quickly offers, "I told you that you could have a turn."

"When?" Booker nails him down.

"Next recess—after Amar."

"Okay." Booker walks away, satisfied. No need to drag Kevin through the steps.

The act of signing up helped Booker cool off sufficiently to approach Kevin with calm confidence. Kevin listened and responded to Booker's complaint because he knew if he didn't, the fairness of the process would prevail upon him later. Save time and take care of the problem right now, thinks Kevin. End of problem. How much better than the old way, which begins with a coercive threat—"I'm telling!"—and ends with resentment—"Tattletale!"

Establishing a New Norm

To reinforce children's growing independence, I prepare a chart entitled "I Solved It By Myself" and make an announcement.

"I have noticed that many of you are so good at Talking It Out, you don't need my help anymore. I am excited about this and want to congratulate you. From now on, please sign this poster whenever you solve a problem without me.

"I also want to change the way we do Talk It Out," I continue. "From now on, you have to try to Talk It Out without me first. If the other person isn't willing to work with you or if you both get stuck, then I'm willing to help."

Next I review problem-solving strategies: "Let's make a reminder list of all the things you can say or do when you are having a problem with someone." The brainstorming that follows summarizes much of what we have learned in the preceding months and yields some new ideas as well:

- Give an I-message.
- Ask nicely.
- Cool off.
- Tell the person what you want.
- Say, "Let's Talk It Out."
- Take turns.
- Walk away.
- Ignore it.
- Find someone else to play with.
- Trade with them.
- Make a deal.

Finally we discuss good times to Talk It Out. In addition to the obvious free time provided by lunch and recess, I agree to let children use the Conflict Corner (or other private space) "by special arrangement." That means it has to be at a time convenient with my schedule (not during a spelling test, for example), and the disputing students have to be sincere in their desire to find a solution rather than waste time. Before sending children off to Talk It Out, I hand them a timer set for three minutes and ask them to report their solution when the bell rings. Knowing that time is limited helps children maintain their focus.

Now my job is easy. When children report their conflicts (and many still do), I listen, let them know I care by paraphrasing what they say, then turn the problem back over to them. If the children have already made an unsuccessful attempt to solve the problem, I offer assistance, either on the spot or later at Talk It Out time. The script in Appendix J suggests ways to encourage children to be independent.

See Appendix J p. 142

With enough guided practice and positive experiences, some children eventually became skillful enough to handle their conflicts without me. Because everyone in the class was alert to conflict situations, problems were addressed as soon as they occurred—when they are easiest to solve—instead of later, when they had escalated into a full-blown battle. Once children realized they could settle things more quickly without me, they found ways to shorten the process considerably. Here's how Elena joins a jump rope game:

Elena: (to me) *They won't let me play jump rope.*
Me: *Oh, so you're upset they won't let you join the game?*
Elena: *Yah. And it's no fair because the jump rope belongs to the whole class.*
Me: *Hmm. I wonder what you could do?*
Elena: *I'm going to Talk It Out.*
Me: *Okay. Let me know if you need help.* (Elena walks to the jump rope game.)
Elena: (to Nicole jumping rope) *I want to play jump rope. Let's Talk It Out.*
Nicole: *Here.* (She hands Elena the rope.) *You can be next.*

Will the Tattling Ever Stop?

Even children with considerable peacemaking ability may continue to report their conflicts to you first. Don't confuse children's need for empathy with a request that you fix their problem. Listen and restate their concerns as always, then shift responsibility back to them. This behavior assures children that you care while at the same time letting them know you have confidence in their ability to handle the situation themselves.

Remember, your job as facilitator is to provide only as much support as children need to be successful. For some children, that may mean holding their hand as they struggle with each step. Others may need you to stand by silently while they do all the talking. Still others, like Elena, only need to know that you care before charging off on their own.

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"You're probably wondering why we called you here."

6 The Class Meeting Option

Thirty-one heads are better than two.
—personal observation

A few children in the class never ask for help Talking It Out. They are good at either ignoring the unpleasant or accommodating the needs of others. Although avoiding and giving in are skillful responses at times, I am always a little suspicious when a child never expresses feelings or needs. Perhaps that's because I was such a child. My goal as a youngster was to make sure everyone liked me, and that meant putting my needs aside. I was so intent on pleasing other people, I literally lost touch with my own experience. I never knew how I felt or what I wanted. That pattern of behaving not only fed a very low self-esteem but temporarily stunted my growth as an assertive, self-directed person.

The Talk It Out process offers too many valuable lessons to allow children to opt out. I want all children to be able to assert their needs in ways that lead to creative solutions and deeper relationships.

When the class gathers for sharing time one day, I ask if anyone is willing to Talk It Out in front of the class instead of in the Conflict Corner. "That way, everyone will have a chance to watch and learn how Talk It Out works," I explain.

I am pleased when so many raise their hands. There is no negative stigma attached to conflict for these children. Indeed, they seem anxious to show off their skill, even if that means revealing uncomfortable feelings. For many, the bonus of having the attention of the class makes the public option irresistible.

Lisa and Amar Talk It Out in Front of the Class

I pull two chairs into the center of the circle facing each other, and ask Lisa and Amar to take a seat.

"Okay. Let's begin with Lisa. What's the problem?" I ask.

"Well, Amar yelled in my ear and it really hurt," she explains.

"So, you don't like people to yell in your ear," I paraphrase. "When did this happen, Lisa?"

"Just before recess when I was at my cubby. He always yells at me," Lisa replies.

I invite Lisa to communicate directly: "Tell Amar how you are feeling and why."

Turning to Amar, Lisa says, "I don't like it when you yell at me, Amar."

"Your turn, Amar. Tell me what happened."

"Well, she's always standing in my way. I told her to move, and she acts like she doesn't hear me so I had to say it louder," Amar replies.

"So, you don't like it when Lisa stands in front of you at the cubbies?" I ask.

"Yah, she's always such a slowpoke," Amar adds.

I hold my hand up. "Remember—no name-calling, Amar."

"Well, she takes a really long time to get her stuff and she won't move and then I'm late," Amar finishes.

"It's important to you to get to recess quickly?" I ask.

"Yes! Otherwise I'm late for kickball," he exclaims.

I direct his attention to Lisa: "Tell Lisa how you are feeling and why."

"I get mad when you're always standing in my way because then I'm late for kickball," Amar says to Lisa.

I summarize the problem, "So, Lisa needs for Amar to stop yelling in her ear, and Amar needs to get out to recess as quickly as possible, right?" Both nod.

"How can you solve the problem so you're both happy? I'll write your ideas down." I'm ready with paper and pencil.

Amar starts, "She can move when I tell her."

"Okay." I write his idea. "Other ideas?"

Lisa has one: "He can ask me nicely instead of yelling."

"Anything else?" I continue taking notes.

Lisa thinks of another: "Amar can apologize for hurting my ear."

"Okay." I write that down. "Anything else?" I ask again, looking at both.

They shake their heads. "Would you like more ideas from the class?" I ask.

"Yes," they nod. I open the brainstorm to everyone. "Who has an idea for Lisa and Amar?"

Several hands are waving, and I jot each idea down.

"Amar and Lisa can take turns going first."

"Amar can move his cubby."

"Lisa can get her things out of her cubby faster."

"Lisa can clean up her cubby so she can find her stuff faster."

The brainstorm ends, and I give the list to Lisa and Amar.

"Talk about these ideas, and when you decide which one you both like, come back and tell us." I direct them to the other side of room to evaluate the ideas. They take pencils to fill in the "feeling face" beside each idea.

Meanwhile, I continue with Jason, the next child listed on the sign-up sheet. He wants to Talk It Out with Michael about fair kickball teams. By the time I finish with Jason and Michael, Lisa and Amar have returned and report the two ideas they chose. Amar will move his cubby, and he agrees to apologize.

"I already said sorry," Amar quickly adds.

"Well, the cubby moving idea also involves us," I say. "Since there are no empty cubbies in the room, where could Amar move?"

"He could trade with me," offers Elena. Elena and Lisa are good friends.

Rochelle's hand is up, and her comment is for me. "I don't think it's fair that Elena gets to change cubbies. You wouldn't let me move next to Vanessa."

"You're right, Rochelle. How many people think it's not fair that two kids get to switch cubbies and no one else can?" I ask the class.

Many hands are up. "Okay. Well, I'm not willing to rearrange the cubbies, so that idea is not going to work."

"I could just keep my stuff at my desk," Amar suggests.

"Sorry, Amar, that won't work for me either," I say. "People might trip if your backpack's on the floor. What's your next favorite idea?"

"Well," says Lisa, "I don't mind if Amar goes first if he will stop yelling at me."

"I will!" Amar returns enthusiastically.

"All right," I say. "Let's practice that once to make sure it will work. Lisa, stand in front of your cubby. Let's say Lisa got to the cubby first and Amar walks up behind her. Amar, what are you going to do?"

Amar says, "Get out of my way."

"How was that, Lisa?" I ask.

"It wasn't very polite," she replies.

"Lisa, switch places with Amar and show him what you want him to do," I suggest.

They switch places, and Lisa taps Amar gently on the shoulder and softly says, "Please move."

"Amar, now try that," I cue him up again.

Amar taps Lisa on the shoulder and repeats Lisa's words. Lisa steps aside and Amar reaches into his cubby.

"Is the problem solved?" I ask, hoping to wrap it up.

"Yes," they both nod.

"Good job!" I announce, and the class claps to thank Lisa and Amar for showing us how to Talk It Out.

Class Meeting Protocol

The procedure for guiding students through the problem-solving process publicly is the same used in the Conflict Corner except the class is invited to join in the brainstorm if the disputants ask for help developing solutions. After ideas are collected, the disputants can evaluate them in front of the class or, as with Lisa and Amar, privately, reporting their winning idea to the group later. This process gives everyone a sense of closure and allows the teacher to assist the two in developing an action plan if necessary. Clapping at the end validates the contribution the disputants have made to the class. Over time we made a poster listing the guidelines for Talking It Out in class meetings; these guidelines are shown in Figure 6.1.

FIGURE 6.1
Talking It Out in Class Meetings

1. You can only Talk It Out in a class meeting if both people want to.
2. Everyone else in the class must follow the rules: be respectful, listen without interrupting, and help the disputants as they work to solve their problem.
3. The only time the class can say anything is if the two kids want help brainstorming ideas.
4. Everyone clap at the end to say thanks.

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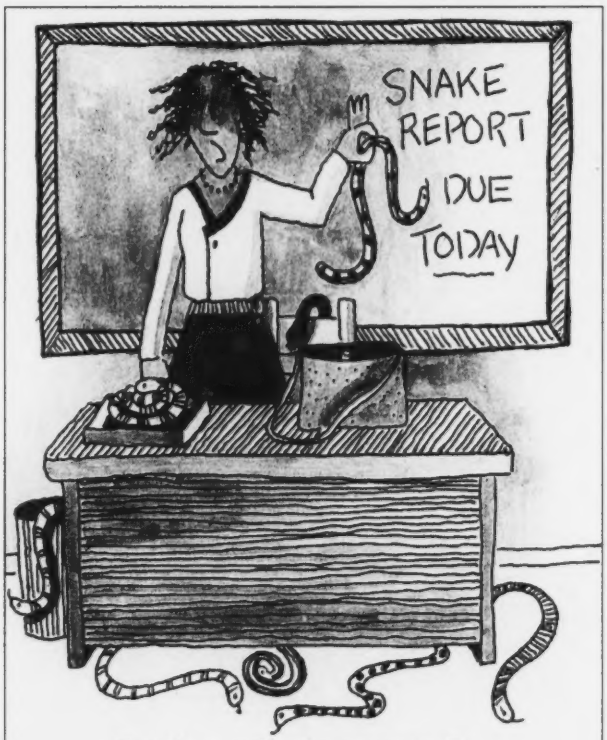
The Class Solves the Art Center Mess

I discover that class meetings are also effective in resolving my own conflicts with the class. Once I became frustrated with the children's treatment of art supplies. Even after repeated lectures about the importance of replacing caps and tops, several markers and paste jars dried up daily and had to be thrown away. Finally, in desperation, I threatened to put the art center away if things didn't improve. Things didn't improve, and the following day the art supplies disappeared into a closet.

The next morning, the children were visibly upset. Margarita approached me and asked, "Ms. Porro, can't we Talk It Out?" Good question. Interesting how quickly I forgot about Talk It Out when the problem involved me! I agreed it was a good idea and signed my name to the list. Later at the Class Meeting I had cooled off enough to present my thoughts and feelings appropriately, using an I-message.

"I feel angry when the art supplies are mistreated because materials get ruined and have to be thrown away."

Next I listened. I discovered that not everyone in the class was mishandling art supplies, and many children felt unfairly punished by a few people's irresponsible actions. I also found out that most people enjoyed using the art materials and valued having access to them.



"I wish to call a class meeting."

I summarized the problem: "How can we leave the art materials out for everyone and still be sure the tops and caps are replaced?" The brainstorm yielded 12 ideas. As one of the disputants, I also participated in generating ideas.

I thought the winning idea would never work. The children created a new, rotating job of Art Manager for the purpose of checking and, if necessary, recapping art supplies each time the class left the room. In fact, the solution worked so well the Art Manager often took great pleasure in informing me that all tops were found securely replaced. That was the end of the problem. After that, when I had a problem that involved the class, I signed the list and waited my turn.

Common Questions About Class Meetings

The following questions and answers address additional concerns you may have about using the class meeting format to help children Talk It Out.

1. I want to schedule a Talk It Out time in my classroom. Should I begin by setting up a Conflict Corner or by having Class Meetings? Both structures have special benefits. Consider the advantages of each in making your decision. Teachers new to conflict resolution and the role of facilitator often find

the Conflict Corner the best place to begin. Undistracted by the usual flood of interruptions and demands, you'll find it's easier to follow the Facilitator's Script and guide children through the process.

Once you become comfortable in the role of facilitator, you may wish to offer Talk It Out time during Class Meetings as well. Because the entire class is involved, you don't have to wonder what to do with the other 28 children. Everyone watches and learns as two classmates solve their problem. Children learn, for example, that feelings are natural and that everyone becomes angry, frustrated, sad, or confused when basic needs are not met. They learn that feelings are temporary and that it is possible to express and release feelings in ways that don't hurt others. Children develop empathy and caring as they see their classmates deal with the same difficult situations they face each day. And, as children watch their peers find solutions to common problems, they are encouraged to solve problems of their own.

Class Meetings also serve as an effective team-building experience. When social problem solving becomes part of the daily school routine, children see themselves as important members of a living, breathing community in which conflicts are expected, differences are appreciated, and disagreements are respectfully handled. Everyone feels more connected and involved when the communication of uncomfortable feelings leads to a happy ending.

While most children in my 2nd grade class enjoyed Talking It Out in front of peers, a few preferred the more private Conflict Corner. Some children were too shy and some conflicts were too personal to air publicly (as when Michael teased Roberto about having a girlfriend and he really did have a special relationship with a girl). The schedule in my room eventually included both options. The Conflict Corner was open for Talk It Out on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On Tuesday and Thursday, children could Talk It Out in the Class Meeting. Children indicated their preference of place next to their name on the sign-up sheet.

2. I have heard of class meetings in which the children decide the outcome of the conflict. Is this the same as your class meeting? Many educators use the general term "class meeting" to describe a variety of activities. In the Class Meetings suggested here, the disputants, not classmates or the teacher, make all the decisions. This approach is based on the assumption that children learn to take responsibility for solving their social problems when they have opportunities to come up with solutions on their own. Another assumption is that the disputants are the only ones with enough information to find solutions that will truly satisfy their needs. When children are unable to find solutions, it is up to the teacher to solve the problem for them. (For more information, read about Dennis in Chapter 9.)

3. What if several classmates saw what happened and have "evidence" to refute what one of the disputants says? Can those who witnessed the conflict be invited to participate? Unlike traditional disciplinary measures, the Talk It Out process is not concerned with deciding who is right or wrong. Talk It Out seeks solutions to problems as defined by the children having the conflict.

Outside observers or witnesses, like any class members, are welcome to participate only in the brainstorm.

4. My 3rd grade class divided along sex lines over the rules of four square. Can I use a Class Meeting to help resolve this large-group conflict? Yes. The Talk It Out process works to resolve conflicts of any size. Before taking the dispute to a Class Meeting, however, check to be sure the children involved feel comfortable talking about the situation publicly. If they do, the brainstorm can be wonderfully enriched by inviting the class to participate. If the disputants do not want to go public with their problem, set up a private time to meet with the groups.

Be aware, the more people involved, the more time-consuming the process becomes. You may wish to ask each group to designate a spokesperson. Also, be prepared to enforce the ground rules! Large-group disputes can get emotionally hot. If the children have trouble taking turns and being respectful, close the session, and handle the situation in a different way. Chapter 11 suggests several alternative strategies.

7

Peers as Peacemakers

Never do for a child what he can do for himself.
—Rudolf Dreikurs

In the spring, special committee work takes me out of the classroom three afternoons in a row. "What about Talk It Out time?" the children groan when they realize a substitute teacher will be taking over. I can't imagine leaving notes for a sub about how we resolve conflicts.

"You can Talk It Out by yourselves during recess," I point out. "If you need help, we'll have Talk It Out time as usual on Thursday."

"But why can't we have it in the morning when you're still here?" asks Kaitlin. She and a few others are having trouble imagining school without the Conflict Corner.

"Sorry," I answer. "There are too many other important things we have to do in the morning. The substitute teacher doesn't know how to Talk It Out. You'll just have to wait until I return on Thursday." This is one decision that is nonnegotiable.

"Can't we help kids Talk It Out?" Elena asks.

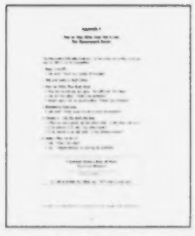
"Hmm. You mean one of you take my part? Well, I don't know. Is there anyone who thinks he can help two kids Talk It Out?"

I'm shocked at how many hands shoot into the air. It hadn't occurred to me to turn the facilitator role over to the children, yet they were ready and willing. Had I become so attached to my importance in the process that I missed an opportunity to make the children more independent of me?

I draw three children's names from a hat and tell the substitute teacher to turn Conflict Corner time over to them. The three-day experiment proves to be a success. The children who Talked It Out while I was away report that the student helpers did a fine job leading them through the steps.

"How did you do it?" I ask the three who played the role of facilitator. Kirsten and Anthony stood by the poster and pointed to the steps. Lisa got more involved. "I asked them questions like you, Ms. Porro," she explained, though she couldn't remember what she had asked. The disputants, it seems, required little more than the chance to meet in the authorized place with someone on hand to officiate. In the end, I formalize this new role by making "Peacemaker" a rotating job. To prepare children, I decide to offer training.

Peacemaker Training

First we discuss the Peacemaker's role, which is more like a referee than a boss or a judge. Instead of telling people what to do or figuring out who is right or wrong, the Peacemaker helps children go through the steps and follow the rules.

See Appendix K p. 143

I prepare a simple script (Appendix K) to help the Peacemaker guide fellow students through the steps. (The script for children deemphasizes the third step, "Find out what you both need." It is difficult for children to identify the true needs that underlie their more obvious position. For a discussion of the difference between "needs" and "positions," see Chapter 2 or Chapter 8.) Then I use two children as disputants to demonstrate how it works.

See Appendix H p. 140

"James, let's say you need an eraser. You look around and find one on the floor and begin using it. Now, Tawana, you can't find your eraser and notice James has it. You're mad because James didn't ask if he could borrow it.

"Now, watch how I help James and Tawana Talk It Out using the question on this paper. Also, notice how I use these two signs in the talk and listen step." I hold up mouth and ear pictures mounted on sticks (like those in Figure 7.1; Appendix H contains enlarged mouth and ear sketches for photocopying).

Reading the script, I begin: "James, have you cooled off enough?"

"Yah," says James.

"Have you, Tawana?" I ask.

"Uh-huh," Tawana answers.

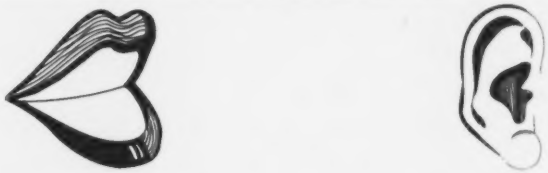
"Okay. Tawana you talk first," I say, handing her the sign with the mouth. "And James, you listen." James gets the ear.

I then begin Step 2: "Tawana, what's the problem?"

"Well, James took my eraser and he didn't even ask me if he could borrow it," she replies.

"Okay. Now switch signs," I say.

FIGURE 7.1
Talk and Listen Signs



When James gets the sign to talk, he starts: "I found this eraser on the floor. I didn't know it was hers."

I collect both signs and move to the next step. "What could you do to solve the problem?" I make eye contact with both students.

"You can give me back my eraser," Tawana suggests.

"Is that okay with you?" I ask James.

"Yah, but can I finish using it first?" James replies.

"Okay," says Tawana.

"Is the problem solved?" I ask.

They both nod, and I ask for a summary in the last step: "So, what's the plan?"

"I'm gonna give Tawana the eraser when I'm done," says James.

"And," adds Tawana, "ask me next time you want to borrow it."

"Okay," James agrees.

"Congratulations for solving the problem!" I smile at both. "Now it's everyone's turn to practice."

I divide the class into groups of three and ask everyone to take a number from one to three. "The number ones are the first Peacemakers. You hold the script and the signs. Number two, you play James's part. You need an eraser and find one on the floor. Number three, you play Tawana's part. You lost your eraser and see James using it. You don't like it when people take your things without asking.

"Peacemakers," I continue, "you help Tawana and James Talk It Out by reading the questions on the script. Remember to use the talk and listen signs in Step 2. The people playing James and Tawana, you can come up with any solution you like, but please follow the rules and be cooperative, as James and Tawana were in the demonstration."

The class erupts into noisy activity, and I get the feeling I have tossed them into the deep end. I circulate among the groups, offering help to the Peacemakers and reminding the disputants to participate respectfully. When the role-plays are finished, we talk about what happened. Some Peacemakers followed the script well. Others lost their place. Some disputants found a solution. Others were unable to solve the problem.

We switch roles and repeat the role-play activity using new conflicts until everyone has had a turn as Peacemaker. By the end of the exercise, a handful of children decide it's too hard and they don't want to be the Peacemaker. Others are eager to practice more.

"You can decide if you want the job of Peacemaker or not," I explain. "But we will need everyone's help in the role-plays tomorrow."

See Appendix E p. 137

When Rules Are Broken

Holding up the rules poster (in Appendix E), I explain, "The second part of your job is to make sure the children follow these rules. Remember, Talk It Out only works when people are respectful and work hard to solve their problem. So, if somebody breaks a rule, then you say, 'There's no interrupting, remember?' or point to the rule that has been broken. If the person breaks a rule again, then say, 'We'll have to stop now.' Maybe the two children need more time to cool off, or they might need my help. They can always try again later."

We practice again in triads using simple situations. This time I ask those playing disputants to break a rule and give the Peacemakers a chance to practice ending the session. No trouble with this part. Breaking rules is probably the most fun they've had all week.

I pull the class together and wrap it up. "Who's ready to be a Peacemaker for a real conflict?" About half the hands are raised. "All right. Sign this list if you want a turn. I'll announce in the morning when it's your day. If you don't want to be a Peacemaker right now, you can always sign the list later when you think you're ready."

Eddie Plays Peacemaker

I place the Peacemaker supplies in the Conflict Corner: the script and the talk and listen signs. The next day I turn over Talk It Out time to Eddie, who is quickly tested.

"Have you cooled off?" Eddie asks Alysha.

"Yes," she says.

"Me too," says Calvin.

"Okay—here." Eddie hands out the signs. "Alysha, you talk. Calvin, you listen."

"Well, Eddie keeps chasing me at recess, and I told him not to but he keeps doing it," Alysha explains.

"All right. Switch," Eddie says as they trade signs.

"Well, see," Calvin says, "there's this chase game we're playing, and the boys chase the girls. And that's the game, see. And if Alysha don't want people chasing her, she don't have to play the game."

"Can I say something?" Alysha asks Eddie impatiently.

"Huh?" Eddie looks a little lost.

"Sometimes I'm not playing the chase game and you still chase me," Alysha says directly to Calvin. "And then you try and kiss me, and that's not part of the game."

Calvin blushes and swallows a grin.

Eddie thinks a minute and then looks up from the script. "Okay. Is the problem solved?"

"No!" exclaims Alysha. "I want Calvin to stop kissing me!"

"Yah, but if she's playing the chase game, I'm gonna chase her," Calvin explains to Eddie.

"Okay, but no kissing," Alysha insists.

"All right," Calvin agrees.

They both get up to leave.

"Wait a second," Eddie waves them back. "I'm not done yet."

Eddie finds his place, "Congratulations for solving the problem!"

A Very Forgiving Process

Alysha and Calvin settled the matter, though Eddie forgot some steps. This sometimes was the case. Regardless of what the Peacemaker did, the disputants often found a way to reconcile. The opposite was also true. Some disputants couldn't reach an agreement no matter how carefully the Peacemaker followed the script. The success of the disputants seemed to have more to do with their intention to "make up" than with the Peacemaker's ability to lead them through the process.

Could Alysha and Calvin have solved their problem without Eddie? If the answer is yes, I would have preferred that Eddie stay out of it. After all my hard work encouraging children to solve problems by themselves, I certainly didn't want the Peacemaker to prevent anyone from working without help.

I decide to add one more question to the top of the Peacemaker script: "Do you want me to help or do you want to Talk It Out by yourselves?" Psychology worked in my favor here. Many children jumped at the chance to dismiss the Peacemaker and smugly proclaim, "Naw, we can handle this ourselves." Though that response disappointed many Peacemakers, it was very exciting for me. The safe structure of the process plus the promise of help if they got stuck encouraged a few more children to try it alone and supported their success.

Note: For more information about how to establish a peer mediation program, see the Selected Resources section on page 115.

"Uh, can't we talk this out?"

8

When You and a Student Talk It Out

Teacher, who you are speaks so loudly
that I can't hear what you are saying.
—found on a teachers' lounge wall

Children are not the only ones with problems in my classroom. When my needs clash with a student's, the conflict that arises disrupts my teaching and often interrupts the learning of others. For example, Lucas refuses to stay at his desk. He pops out of his seat as regularly as the clock ticks off minutes. After many reminders, I suggest we Talk It Out.

Lucas is open to the idea. He has spent a fair amount of time in the Conflict Corner and is well acquainted with the process. I arrange for his mom to pick him up later after school one day. Talking It Out with Lucas will require my full attention.

Before we begin, I remind myself to use a friendly, respectful tone of voice. This requires some restraint. I feel frustrated enough to issue Lucas an

ultimatum to stay in his seat—or else! I know that approach doesn't work, however, because I've already tried it.

I sit with Lucas in the Conflict Corner and begin: "I'll go first. I feel frustrated when you get out of your seat and walk around the room. It's hard for me to concentrate on teaching, and it's hard for the other kids to concentrate on learning. Plus you don't get your work done. So, that's my part of the problem. What's going on for you?"

"Huh?" he answers.

"When you get out of your seat, what is it you want?"

"Well, sometimes I have to sharpen my pencil."

"Okay—and what else?"

"Go to the bathroom."

I reach for paper. "You say all the reasons you walk around the room, and I'll write them down."

A minute later the list includes get a drink of water, get supplies from the art center, get something from his cubby, and ask someone a question.

I summarize the list: "So, you get out of your seat to get things, to go to the bathroom, and to ask questions. I can think of one more reason. I wonder if you want us to notice you. Do you think that's a reason you walk around sometimes?"

"Yah, I guess so." Lucas smiles a bit.

"Now, what can we do so that you get the things you need without walking around and disturbing us? Let's come up with as many ideas as we can."

I am a disputant and can contribute to the brainstorm. I start the ball rolling with a silly idea. "Let's see . . . we could not have work time anymore."

We both smile as I write that down. Lucas is quiet, so I offer another idea: use the bathroom and get drinks during recess. Lucas groans and I ask, "What idea do you like better than that one?"

"I think I should get to go to the bathroom if I really have to," Lucas answers, and I add his idea to the list.

I state the problem again: "What else can we do so that you have the supplies and attention you need without walking around the room?"

I allow silence. Eventually more ideas come: sharpen pencils before work time, keep supplies at his desk, raise his hand when he has a question.

"What about ways you can get our attention without walking around?" I ask.

"Hmm." He thinks for a moment, then offers, "I could do special stuff for you."

"Like what?"

"I could help you in the morning before the bell," he suggests. Children are always trying to talk their way into the room before school starts. My usual response is no. That's my time to work alone.

"You mean like sharpening pencils?" I ask.

"Yah!" This is just what Lucas has in mind. Sharpening pencils is perhaps his favorite pastime.

"Any other jobs?" I ask.

Lucas thinks of others: run errands for me and pass out and collect pencils. I record these ideas even though I know they're not workable. Running errands is the line leader's responsibility, and distributing pencils would be too disruptive and time-consuming. My evaluative comments, however, are not welcome until the next step.

"This is a good long list. Now let's read over the ideas and find the ones we both like."

All the ideas except three get two "smileys." I veto the idea of running errands and the idea of passing out and collecting pencils in favor of our current system. I do, however, agree to be on the lookout for other special ways Lucas can help.

I give a "so-so" (straight line) response to the idea that Lucas can go to his cubby and the bathroom if he "really has to." Lucas, however, is very hot on the idea, so we continue talking until we come up with something with which we both can live. Lucas can make one emergency visit to his cubby and to the bathroom (drink included) each day. After that he must stay in his seat, even if he needs something really important. I write down these details, as I'm likely to forget, probably more so than Lucas.

In the final planning step, we think through all the details. It's one thing to have good intentions; it's another to actually change behavior. The more concrete our plan, the more likely we'll succeed. I review the ideas we adopted and ask, "How can we make sure these ideas will work?"

Lucas's responses are thoughtful. He decides to make a list of the supplies he needs at his desk and to write himself a reminder note about staying in his seat. I decide to come to school a few minutes early so I will be free to give Lucas attention while he is sharpening pencils. We also figure out a way to keep track of the one daily trip he is allowed to his cubby and the bathroom. I write "cubby" and "bathroom" on two Popsicle sticks. When Lucas needs to make a trip, he will hand me the appropriate stick, which I will keep until the following morning.

Before we end, Lucas gets ready for tomorrow. He tapes the reminder sign to his desk and stocks up on supplies. We decide to check in at the end of the day and talk about how our plan worked.

I don't feel finished yet, however. One nagging thought persists. What if Lucas doesn't keep his agreement? What if he wanders around just to see what I'll do? Or maybe he has good intentions but can't change his habits so quickly. In either case, I need to establish a back-up plan, one that lets Lucas know I will not allow him to disturb the class again.

"One more thing," I add. "What do you think should happen if you get out of your seat during work time tomorrow?"

"You can just tell me to sit down," says Lucas.

"No, Lucas. I'm not willing to remind you because that interrupts my teaching again," I answer. "If you get out of your seat during work time tomorrow, that means the plan we just made is too hard for you to follow and I'll have to solve the problem another way. I want you to take your work next door if you disturb us tomorrow."

CONFLICT
CORNER
TAKE
A
NUMBER

"To Mrs. Miller's room?" Lucas groans. The 3rd graders are not nearly as much fun to entertain as his peers.

"That's right. We can ask Mrs. Miller to find a quiet place for you to work."

"Why can't I just go to our time-out seat?" asks Lucas.

"Because sometimes when you sit in the time-out seat you do things that make the kids look at you. I'm sorry, Lucas. I would rather you work in the room, too. But it's my job to keep the room quiet so everyone can concentrate. If you can't follow the plan we just made and stay in your seat, you'll have to work next door."

The tone of my voice is still friendly and supportive even as I establish a firm bottom line. Though Lucas is not pleased with the possibility of leaving the room, it is a reasonable consequence.

The following morning I arrive 10 minutes early. By the time Lucas taps at the door, I'm ready for his visit. He sharpens pencils while we chat. I thank him for the great job (he even empties the sharpener), and the rest of the class flows in at the sound of the bell.

"Hey, Ms. Porro," Vanessa grumbles. "How come Lucas gets to be in here?"

"He was doing a special job for me." Lucas beams with the announcement.

Much to my delight, I did not have to send Lucas next door that day. Admittedly, he used his emergency trip to the bathroom and cubby and asked at least five times if there was something special he could do. His way of staying in his seat was also a bit distracting. He bounced and jiggled, shuffled paper, and dropped pencils, which were quite a challenge to reach with his foot. He did not, however, leave his seat. I found myself slipping him a "thumbs-up" signal several times in support of his efforts, which made us both smile. Secret positive attention was even more delicious than the negative stuff I had dished out the day before. We were definitely on our way.

What really clinched the deal was something that happened by chance the following week. As part of our big Clean the School Campaign, the class decided to collect playground trash and make a giant litter monster to display in front of the school. No one was more excited about the project than Lucas. The following morning he showed up with rubber gloves and a garbage can liner, which established him as unofficial leader of the litter patrol. The other children found it easier to dump their handfuls of litter into Lucas's big bag than to carry one of their own.

By the end of the week, Lucas had quite a dedicated troop of workers and a fair number of admirers. Even the big kids were entertained as Lucas undauntedly sifted through muddy patches under bushes looking for the dread litter. It was the smelliest week on record in our room, and we decided it produced the biggest litter monster in the world.

After that, Lucas didn't waste much time on small stuff like wandering around the room. Everyone now knew who he was—Tom Sawyer of the '90s. I can't say I planned it, but I gave Lucas lots of air time that week as he worked to establish his exciting new identity.

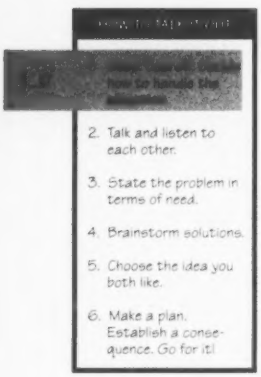
A Closer Look at Resolving Conflicts with Students

The steps I followed while Talking It Out with Lucas are basically the same six steps used in the Conflict Corner:

1. Stop. Cool off. Decide how to handle the situation.
2. Talk and listen to each other.
3. State the problem in terms of need.
4. Brainstorm solutions.
5. Choose the idea(s) you both like.
6. Make a plan. Establish a consequence. Go for it!

The difference between helping two children Talk It Out and negotiating directly with a student is that I must play two roles: that of facilitator and participant. It's no small task. In addition to listening to Lucas respectfully and containing my frustration, I must also facilitate the process and keep it moving in a direction that is fair to both of us. Though a child is sitting across from me, my most advanced skills are required.

It would be so much easier to simply send Lucas away the next time he leaves his chair. Yet it behooves me to model the skills I work so hard to teach. Talking It Out directly with the person I'm upset with is precisely what I am asking children to do. When I talk out problems I'm having with children, my message is doubly loud: do what I say and do what I do.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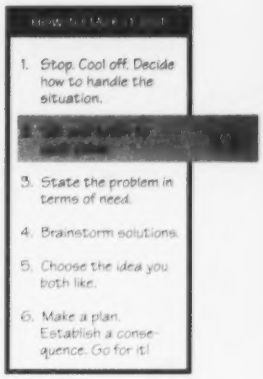
Step 1: Cool Off and Decide How to Handle the Situation

When you find yourself in conflict with a student, first decide how you want to handle the situation. Though Talk It Out is a powerful strategy for solving problems with students, not every issue is negotiable. Running in the halls and throwing stones on the playground are unacceptable behaviors. Whether or not a child works on daily assignments is not open for discussion. When children test the limits of safe and appropriate behavior, we must step in and quickly establish firm guidelines. (Chapter 11 offers ideas about how to be directive when time is short and immediate action is necessary.)

If, however, the problem is a recurring one, the problem-solving approach is well worth a try. Though walking around the room during work time is nonnegotiable, taking Lucas's needs and feelings into consideration in establishing a new plan can make all the difference. When we listen respectfully to children and offer them real power in deciding what happens next, they are less likely to flex their muscle in negative ways.

Don't forget to cool off before beginning the process. Showing your anger or frustration can escalate a student's hostility and reinforce misbehavior. Release negative feelings privately. Let time pass. Make a date to Talk It Out later when you can speak respectfully and think logically.

Step 2: Talk and Listen to Each Other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In the second step, you and the student have a chance to openly talk about the conflict and be heard by each other. This exchange of information defines the problem and clarifies issues from both perspectives. To open lines of communication, keep these tips in mind:

• **Set the stage for respectful communication.** Many students assume they are about to get into trouble when they conference with a frustrated teacher. Their ears shut down and their defenses automatically go up. Begin by putting students at ease. Let them know you want to solve the problem in a way that works for both of you and that you need their help to do that.

Your voice tone and body language communicate your intention even more directly than your words. A relaxed yet focused posture in combination with a firm, friendly tone of voice tells students that although the problem is serious, you care about them and are confident a mutually satisfying solution can be found. Your respectful treatment of students is more likely to summon their most respectful treatment of you.

• **Use nonjudgmental language.** It is tempting to lecture and blame when your frustration has peaked. I felt like telling Lucas how disrespectful it is to constantly wander around the room disrupting everyone. True as this statement may be, a negative label like *disrespectful* would only put Lucas on the defensive. Lucas can't do a good job listening if he is busy defending himself.

The I-message discussed earlier is a better way to describe the problem and express strong feelings without criticizing or blaming the child:

"I feel _____ when you _____ because _____."
(feeling) (specific behavior) (how it affects you)

or

"When you _____, it's a problem because _____."
(specific behavior) (how it affects you)

"When you walk around the room it makes it hard for us to concentrate" communicates a basic respect for Lucas while clearly defining the problem. Notice the use of specific, objective terms. Lucas can't argue with the fact that he walks around the room, but he might take offense if I accuse him of "constantly wandering around disturbing everyone." The more neutral my language, the more likely Lucas will get my message.

The I-message is free of negative judgments in another important way. Lucas's behavior is not bad or wrong; it simply interferes with my need to maintain a distraction-free classroom. I take responsibility for owning the problem rather than blaming Lucas, who is walking around the room to satisfy his own needs. Put another way, Lucas is not misbehaving; his needs are clashing with mine. Leaving judgments behind is easier when we realize that

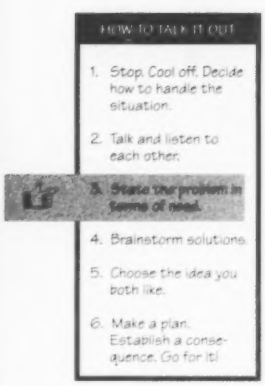
children, like adults, engage in a variety of behaviors to satisfy normal human needs.

Select your words carefully before taking your turn to talk. Rethink the situation beforehand and come up with a description of the problem that doesn't blame or criticize. Showing a child this kind of respect helps him get your message and goes a long way in establishing a trusting relationship. A child who feels your care and concern, especially during stressful times, will more likely be on your side in the future.

• **Listen for understanding.** Listen to the child with the explicit purpose of understanding the problem from his or her perspective. This kind of listening can be difficult. We are so accustomed to giving advice and lecturing, we typically listen only for the purpose of setting children straight. It may feel unnatural, even wrong, to acknowledge a child's viewpoint when we disapprove of what is said. Remember that listening does not imply agreement or approval. Nodding as the child speaks does not say, "You are right and I am wrong"; rather, it says, "I understand how you see it." The child's perspective, though different from your own, is nonetheless valid.

As you become clear about what the child is saying, let the child know you understand. Restate or paraphrase the child's important thoughts and feelings. This demonstrates your acceptance of the child and your intention to fully understand. It also gives the child a chance to expand your understanding and correct any misconceptions. Take notes as you listen. Notes provide a record of the child's concerns to be addressed later and keep you focused on listening. If you are busy taking notes you are less likely to interrupt.

Step 3: State the Problem in Terms of Need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In conflict situations, teacher and student seem to have mutually exclusive needs and incompatible differences. Lucas wants to walk around the room. I want Lucas to stay seated. On this issue we stand in direct opposition. Either I win or Lucas wins—or so it appears.

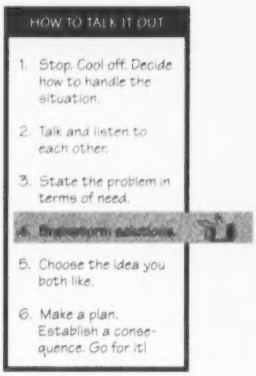
Beneath our positions, however, are underlying interests or needs that can both be satisfied. Why do we take these positions? In my case, I want work time to be free from distractions. Lucas, on the other hand, needs to go places for supplies, for drinks, for help, to use the bathroom, and to get attention. When we explore underlying interests rather than argue about positions, we find there are solutions that work well for both of us.

Detective work is often required to identify the needs that motivate us (and children) to take a particular position. "Why did I/you do that? What did I/you want to accomplish?" are helpful questions to ask. Children, however, are often not aware of the unmet need that motivates their behavior. At times it is possible to make a guess. It was clear to me that, in addition to the needs Lucas was able to identify, his behavior was also working to get our attention.

According to psychologist Jane Nelsen, the ultimate goal of all student behavior is to "find a sense of belonging and significance." Perhaps that is why Lucas's problem behavior diminished so dramatically after his leadership

experience with the school clean-up. Having found a special place in our room that satisfied his most basic need to belong and feel important, Lucas no longer felt compelled to seek attention in negative ways. This example suggests that in addition to addressing the more explicit needs that emerge in conflict situations, teachers must continually work to help children connect with each other in meaningful ways.

Step 4: Brainstorm Solutions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In the fourth step you ask the child to join you in thinking of ways to solve the problem. This invitation to collaborate does not have a hidden agenda. You are not asking the child to guess your "right" way nor are you attempting to impose your favorite solution in a sneaky way. You are truly asking the child to come up with solutions that will satisfy both of you.

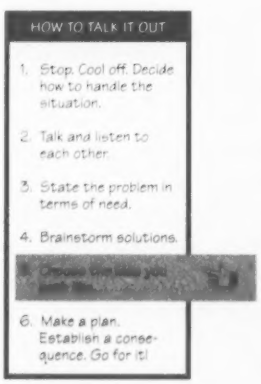
The rules for brainstorming discussed earlier apply here as well. Come up with many ideas as quickly as possible with no comments. The more ideas generated, the better your chances of finding one that works for both of you. Write the ideas down, no matter how crazy they seem. Silly ideas sometimes spark a practical idea later. Hold all criticisms and evaluative comments until the next step, as they tend to stop the creative flow.

As one of the disputants, you can offer ideas along with the child, but be careful not to dominate the brainstorm. Start with a silly idea to loosen things up. Don't rush the process. Allow time for the child to think. If the child objects to an idea you suggest, reframe his objection as another idea. Lucas groaned when I suggested he not use the bathroom during work time. "What idea do you like better than that?" elicited Lucas's preferred idea—that he use the bathroom when he "really had to."

Even when teachers are encouraging and supportive, some children have little to offer. Brainstorming solutions to social problems is a new experience for many. Fortunately, like any skill, brainstorming improves with practice.

You may find an occasional student who refuses to cooperate. Let resistant students know that although you are committed to developing a solution that works for everyone, you will have to rely on ideas of your own if they are unable to participate. (My work with Dennis in Chapter 9 explores this situation fully.)

Step 5: Choose the Idea(s) You Both Like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Read the list of ideas and ask, "How does this work for us?" Record responses as you go. The "feeling" faces described earlier evaluate ideas in a concrete way and assure the child his feelings count. A smile means, "I like this idea." A frown means, "I don't like this idea." A straight line means, "This idea might be okay."

If several ideas receive two smiles, decide which will be incorporated into your plan. When no ideas are approved by both of you, go to the next best option—usually an idea that has a smile and a straight line—and ask how the idea might be changed to make it more acceptable. Lucas put a smile next to

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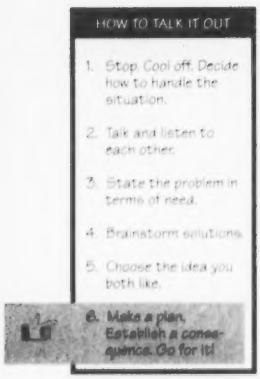
the idea of using the bathroom and getting drinks when he "had to." I voiced my concern with a straight line face. We finally reached a comfortable agreement—only one visit to the bathroom and cubby each day. When all ideas have been evaluated and at least one idea is acceptable to both, proceed to the last step.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Step 6: Make a Plan, Establish a Consequence, and Go For It

After investing so much time and effort developing solutions, you want to be sure your ideas will work to solve the problem. Choosing good ideas, however, doesn't necessarily bring about positive change. You must act on those ideas, and that requires a plan. The more specific and concrete the plan, the more likely it will succeed.

Though Lucas and I agreed on one visit to the bathroom and cubby daily, I might easily lose track in the course of a busy day. Better to build a self-monitoring component into the plan. It's that kind of detail and foresight that brings about the happy ending we both intended.

The following questions can help hammer out the details of a successful action plan:

- Which ideas will we include in our plan?
- How will the ideas be implemented?
- When? Where? Who?
- What might go wrong?
- How can we make sure the idea will work?

Even the best-laid plans fail because of unforeseen circumstances. Set up a time to evaluate later so you don't continue an unsuccessful plan or let the issue slip into becoming a problem again.

What if the child doesn't follow through with the plan? Children who don't keep their agreements are essentially telling us they are not ready for so much responsibility. It might therefore be necessary to establish a back-up plan or consequence that stops the inappropriate behavior and helps the child make a positive change.

Ask the child ahead of time what he or she thinks should happen if the agreement breaks down and the problem recurs. Children know best what works for them, and when children help determine consequences they're more likely to cooperate. Or, as with Lucas, simply tell the child what will happen if the initial plan fails. I let Lucas know that if he continued to walk around he would have to work in Mrs. Miller's room. This contingency plan gave Lucas a chance to make an informed choice. He can solve the problem our way, using the plan we just developed, or my way, which involves moving next door. Either way, Lucas's distracting behavior will not be permitted. That a back-up plan existed may have encouraged Lucas to keep our original agreement.

As with any win-win solution, the back-up plan must solve the problem for you in a way that is also fair to the student. Removing Lucas during work time eliminates his distracting behavior without being overly harsh or puni-

tive. Although Lucas does not like the idea of working next door, this option is a logical consequence. When Lucas can't control his disruptions, he loses the privilege of working in our room.

Remember, too, that the purpose of any intervention is not only to stop the troublesome behavior in the moment, but also to help the child choose more appropriate behavior in the future. If working in Mrs. Miller's room turned out to be a rewarding experience for Lucas, it would be necessary to find a different consequence, one that would encourage Lucas to return and work quietly at his own desk.

"I see somebody needs to cool off."

9 When It's Time to Take Over

Where did we ever get the crazy idea that to make people do better, first we have to make them feel worse? People do better when they feel better.

—Jane Nelsen

There will always be students who are not ready to Talk It Out, just as there are students who are not ready for the math and reading lessons we deliver daily. Children with limited social skills are not difficult to spot. Some act out aggressively, then run away. Others are stuck in blaming cycles perpetuated by denial. A few attempt to Talk It Out but cannot follow the rules; interrupting, yelling, and name calling quickly stop the process. Whenever problem solving breaks down, you must be prepared to stop inappropriate actions and establish guidelines for acceptable behavior.

Dennis Strikes Out

Roberto is holding back the tears as he reports what happened: "Dennis scribbled all over my picture just because I wouldn't let him use my marker."

Roberto is one of my more skillful Peacemakers. Dennis recently joined our class and is new to Talk It Out.

"Did you tell Dennis how you feel?" I ask.

"Yes. I gave him an I-message, but he just ran away. And now look." Roberto shows his paper. "My picture's wrecked."

"You're really angry Dennis ruined your special drawing, aren't you."

Roberto sniffs and nods.

"Come with me and let's talk to Dennis together."

We find Dennis at the art table, idly fingering the crayons. I urge Roberto forward and help him to begin again: "Tell Dennis how you feel."

Dennis flies under the table as Roberto starts, "I'm mad you wrecked my picture, Dennis."

I bend down and find Dennis with his fingers in his ears. "Tell me what you heard Roberto say," I prompt.

No response. The process has broken down in predictable Dennis fashion. It doesn't matter how willing and able Roberto is. Two are required to Talk It Out.

Even if Dennis isn't listening, however, Roberto needs the chance to let Dennis know how he feels about the scribbles. As Roberto expresses his anger directly to Dennis, he moves out of the victim role and into an empowered position. Dennis is confronted with the first natural consequence of his misbehavior—a hurt classmate.

The next consequence Dennis must face is an unhappy teacher. Scribbling on someone's picture, or any behavior that interferes with the rights of others, is unacceptable in my classroom. Dennis really has two conflicts: one with Roberto for scribbling on his paper and one with me for breaking an important class rule, that property is treated respectfully. Dennis will have to Talk It Out with me as well as make amends with Roberto. Nothing, however, is possible until everyone has had a chance to cool off.

I turn to Roberto. "It looks like we'll have to wait for Dennis to cool off before we talk to him. I'm sorry about your drawing. Is there any way you can erase the scribbles?"

"Naw, I'll just start over." Roberto finds a new paper and returns to his seat.

Bending down, I speak to Dennis. "I'm also upset about what happened to Roberto's drawing, Dennis. And I can see you're upset about something too. I can't let you be around the other kids until you've cooled off and we've had a chance to talk this out. Do you want to cool off in the time-out chair or outside the door?"

Dennis shakes his head and points to the floor.

"You want to cool off under the table?"

Dennis nods.

"That's okay with me as long as you don't touch anyone. Can you agree to do that?"

Dennis nods again.

"When you're ready to talk about it, come and get me."

I announce to the class, "Dennis is cooling off under the art table. Be sure to leave him alone." The children have no trouble respecting Dennis's need for space. They know from experience it's best to stay away from people who are cooling off.

Dennis and I Talk It Out

The recess bell rings and after a quick cleanup, the class files out the door. I approach Dennis respectfully. "Excuse me, Dennis. I have some papers to run off and I can't leave you alone in the room. Please finish cooling off in the office until I get back."

"I'm finished now," he says, slowly crawling out.

"All right. Let's sit and talk." We move to the Conflict Corner. "First, I really appreciate the way you controlled yourself under the table. You didn't disturb anyone, and after just 10 minutes you're ready to talk."

Dennis is staring at the floor, but I can tell he's listening.

"Now tell me what happened," I begin the process again.

"Roberto was being mean. He wouldn't let me use his red marker."

"So, you asked Roberto to borrow his marker and he said no?" I ask.

"Yah."

"I can understand how disappointed you were when Roberto wouldn't let you use his marker. It's okay to get angry at Roberto. It's not okay to scribble on his picture. Let's think of something different you can do next time you get angry so that no one gets upset."

Dennis is silent, his head turned away.

"All right, I'll help you think of some ideas. The next time you get angry," I say, pausing for a moment, "you could . . . come to me and ask for help." I begin a list. "You could . . . scribble on some paper . . . go under a table and cool off . . . get a drink of water . . . take some deep breaths. Can you think of anything else you can do next time you get angry?"

Dennis shakes his head.

"All right. Which idea do you like best?" I read the list back to Dennis and he points to "come to me and ask for help."

I ask for a commitment. "So, you agree to come to me the next time you get angry?"

Dennis nods.

"Is that yes or no, Dennis?"

"Yes."

"Good. We have an agreement."

Dennis may have good intentions about keeping his agreement, but I wonder if he can gain immediate control over his impulsive behavior. I decide to establish a back-up plan that will protect children from being hurt and let Dennis know hurtful behavior will not be permitted.

"If you forget to come to me the next time you are angry, I am going to ask you to sit at the table by my desk until you're sure you won't scribble on someone's paper or hurt anyone. Do you understand?"

"Yes," says Dennis.

Finally, I address the original conflict. "Now, let's talk about the problem with Roberto. Do you still need a red marker?"

"Yah."

"Do you have any ideas about how to get a red marker?"

Dennis softly replies, "Roberto will just say no."

"You might be right. He's still pretty upset about the picture you scribbled on. Can you think of a way to help Roberto feel better?" I ask.

"I could say sorry," Dennis mumbles.

"So you want to apologize to Roberto about the scribbles? And ask him again to borrow his red marker?" I ask.

Dennis shrugs his shoulders.

"How about if I help you talk to Roberto about borrowing the marker," I suggest.

"Okay," says Dennis.

"After lunch we'll meet in the Conflict Corner," I say.

"Okay," Dennis says again.

"Good. See you after recess." We both stand up. "Oh, and if you get mad again, what are you going to do?"

"Get you," he answers.

"What if it's at recess and I'm not around?" I ask.

"I'll get yard duty," Dennis replies. We both scoot out the door for the last few moments of free time.

This episode with Dennis actually represents some progress. Last week when Dennis was hurtful, he ran away and refused to talk to me for 20 minutes. This time he chose a place to cool off and after 10 minutes was able to participate in parts of the problem-solving process. Later, with my assistance, he Talked It Out with Roberto. He told Roberto he was sorry about the scribbles, and he asked if there was a way he could help him feel better. Roberto answered that he would like to play with Dennis's calculator. Roberto also told Dennis he didn't want him to use his red marker because he was afraid Dennis would "wreck it." In the end a deal was struck in which the calculator was exchanged for the red marker. Both children agreed to be careful and return each item undamaged.

It isn't until the next day that Dennis loses control again. During a watercolor activity, Tawana accidentally splashes water on Dennis, who immediately pushes her down. I follow the same procedure, this time enforcing the consequence. I help Tawana give Dennis an I-message and move Dennis to the desk at the front. Later, when the class leaves for P.E., we have our talk. I thank Dennis for not running away and remind him that I can't let him be around the other children until he is certain he will ask for my help when he gets angry and before he hurts anyone. "When you're ready to do that, you can sit with the other kids."

Working with Children Who Have Limited Social Skills

Challenging students like Dennis present the opportunity to practice everything we know about approaching conflicts as problems to be solved. Often the problems unskillful children stir up with their peers are also problems for us. When a child threatens the rights and safety of others, we must also become involved.

In addition to the ideas discussed in Chapter 8, here are a few more tips for working with students who are not willing or able to participate responsibly in the problem-solving process.

• **Define the problem as two separate conflicts.** When a conflict between children involves you, approach the situation as two separate conflicts needing two separate solutions—one between the disputing students and one between yourself and the student with whom you take issue. Although this approach may sound complicated, if you are already using the Talk It Out process to resolve conflicts among students and to find solutions to problems you are having with students, combining the two is just the next step. Appendix M shows how the two processes can be used together to handle "double-headed" dilemmas.

See Appendix M p. 145

It is not practical to handle every child-child-teacher conflict as thoroughly as the one with Dennis. There simply aren't enough hours in the day. Save your in-depth negotiations for the one or two children with the most persistent problem behaviors.

It is also unrealistic to expect you'll be able to Talk It Out with the most difficult students in your class right away. Dealing with unskillful students requires your most advanced skill. Begin with relatively easy situations and build your skills until you feel confident enough to approach the more challenging ones. Other, more expedient ways to handle difficult situations are discussed in Chapter 11.

• **Focus on the problem behavior, not the child's personality.** As frustrated as you may be feeling about certain personality characteristics of the child, remember that the conflict is about the child scribbling on another student's paper, not how immature or destructive the child may seem. Describe the problem behavior in specific, objective terms or you run the risk of not only alienating the child, but establishing a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we call a child destructive (or any other negative label), the child may take the description as fact and act out accordingly, which in turn satisfies our negative expectation. Carefully follow the I-message formula in presenting your view of the situation, and your subjective opinion will automatically be eliminated.

• **Involve the student as much as possible.** Although children like Dennis have difficulty participating in the problem-solving process, it is important to try to involve them every step of the way. Students are ultimately responsible for changing their problem behavior, and their ideas about how to make a change are more likely to work than ones imposed by you. The invitation to collaborate also lets children know you care about them, you respect their

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ideas, and you need their help. Essentially you are saying, "I have a problem with this particular behavior for this reason. I want to solve it in a way that works for you, so I need your input." This approach helps shift the child's perspective from "me against you" to "us against the problem."

It is often difficult, however, for children with limited skill to fully participate in the process. Dennis hides when he makes a mistake. He shrugs his shoulders when asked a question. He hasn't any idea how to act differently next time. If he knew a better way to get his needs met, he probably wouldn't have created the problem in the first place.

Each time the child withdraws, provide answers of your own. Think aloud as you supply the necessary information, ideas, or decisions, as if to say, "Since you're having difficulty with this part, let me help you think of some ideas." When you move to the next step, open up dialogue once again and invite the child to participate.

After Dennis hid under the table, I offered him a choice about where to cool off. Dennis pointed to the floor and, with that small gesture, began working with me instead of against me. Dennis was no longer withdrawing from the problem but taking the first step toward solving it.

Later, when the heat of the moment had passed, I asked Dennis to think of a better way to handle his anger next time. Dennis shrugged his shoulders, so I generated a list of acceptable alternatives. When I asked Dennis which idea he would like to try, he took me up on the offer. He chose to come to me and "ask for help" instead of lashing out. Though, in fact, he was unable to do that next time, he at least verbalized the idea. Talking about behavioral change often precedes the ability to do it.

• **Establish nonpunitive consequences.** Before closing the session, establish a back-up plan or consequence that tells the child ahead of time what will happen if the plan is unsuccessful and the problem happens again. The most effective consequences are those that help children learn from their mistakes and improve their behavior in the future. Psychologist Jane Nelsen, author of *Positive Discipline*, offers three helpful criteria for selecting logical consequences: they are **related** to the problem behavior, they are **respectful** of the child, and they are **reasonable** rather than overly harsh, considering the child's age.

The consequence for Dennis's hurtful behavior met all three criteria. It was related: Dennis lost the privilege of sitting with his peers when his anger posed a threat to those around him. It was reasonable: Dennis was invited to return to his table when he was certain he could manage his anger. And the consequence was respectfully put into effect. There was no public scolding or embarrassing reprimand as I helped Dennis move to his new seat.

The original problem between Dennis and Roberto resulted in consequences as well. Dennis had to face his unhappy classmate and figure out a way to help Roberto feel better. He also got the chance to Talk It Out with Roberto and borrow the red marker. What better consequence for Dennis than a firsthand experience getting what he wants in an acceptable way?

• **It's not what you say, it's how you say it.** You can't fake respect. The tone of your voice and your body language will give away your true intention. If you are motivated by caring and concern for the child, your words will help. If you are motivated by revenge, the child will feel punished or put-down and the intervention will harm. Even a perfectly logical consequence delivered with an angry voice feels like a punishment to the child.

We are all human and make mistakes at times. If you get hooked into a power struggle, separate yourself from the situation until you can approach the problem and the child with a level head and a matter-of-fact tone of voice. If you slip into a punishing lecture or reprimand, excuse yourself for some cool-off time, apologize to the child, and begin again.

• **Speak to the child in private.** How would you feel if your principal discussed a problem he was having with you in the teachers' room during lunch? It is embarrassing, even humiliating, to be publicly confronted with a personal problem. A private problem-solving conference allows children (and adults) to save face with peers and preserve their self-respect.

• **Be patient and realistic.** Real change is slow and hard. Children with years of experience handling conflict aggressively are not likely to change overnight. Those accustomed to punishment will take even longer to trust you and realize you are on their side. Set realistic expectations. Acknowledge and validate any signs of improvement, however minimal. Drop hard feelings as soon as the problem has been handled. Take every opportunity to establish a positive relationship.

• **Ask for help.** Recognize your limitations; we can do only so much. Some children have problems that require professional attention. Involve parents and the principal. If you are fortunate enough to have counselors, social workers, and psychologists working at your school, ask for their help. While you're at it, get support for yourself. The stress of dealing with dysfunctional behavior can also be damaging to you.

Why Not Punish?

Wouldn't it be quicker and easier to scold Dennis or send him to the principal as a consequence for his disrespectful behavior? The answer, of course, is yes. Reprimanding Dennis or sending him away would no doubt stop the scribbling, at least for the moment. Punishment, however, is a poor choice if you want Dennis to cooperate in the future. The embarrassment and humiliation Dennis may experience as a result of a "good scolding" would only increase his resentment and hostility toward you and toward the student who tattled and got him into trouble. Negative feelings can resurface later in open or passive rebellion. A punitive response from you ensures that the vengeful cycle continues.

Punitive solutions also reinforce the idea that aggression is an acceptable response to conflict. Dennis gets angry and strikes out at Roberto by scribbling

"How many times have I told you not to YELL!"

on his paper. You get angry and strike out at Dennis by embarrassing him publicly. The lesson Dennis internalizes is that it is okay to win at others' expense as long as you're bigger and more powerful. Might makes right. Dennis's aggressive inclinations are strengthened by a punishing response from you.

Interestingly enough, students and teachers often react aggressively in conflict situations for the same reasons. Aggression gets quick results, it feels right (in the moment) to use force to control a threatening situation, and we don't know what else to do! There are few models in our culture for winning a battle any other way.

Adults, too, are often misguided in their belief that children must suffer negative consequences in order to learn from their mistakes. Yet psychologists tell us that when children—and grown-ups—feel bad, they behave badly. Children are more likely to make a positive change when their dignity and self-respect remain intact.

10 Fine-Tuning to Match the Child and the Moment

It is not possible to step into the same river twice.
—*Heraclitus*

I often feel as if I'm flying kites. My job as a teacher is to get the children off the ground and flying as high as they can. Each child is surrounded by different conditions. Kaitlin flutters in a delicate breeze. I pull her taut and run fast to catch more air in her sail. Booker blows in on a powerful gust. I quickly release his string and he lifts into the clouds. The wind surrounding Dennis is chaotic. Three quick spins and he crashes to the ground. He'll need a longer tail before we try again.

My job comes with 30 kites, each accompanied by its own climate, each requiring a special touch. My seemingly impossible job is to tend to all of them simultaneously, to run and stand at just the right moment, to hold each string with just enough tension, to coax and cheer with just the right tone. Sound challenging? Sound familiar? Each of us does it everyday.

Children arrive at our door with a wide range of needs and abilities. This is true of every subject we teach and every class we meet. Our goal is to move each student toward greater skill and independence in all curriculum areas. We accomplish the task by responding to children as individuals, by tailoring our lessons to meet their needs. Nonreaders dictate a story to an adult while independent readers edit each other's writing in the same 2nd grade classroom, all at the same time.

The same is true when teaching conflict resolution skills. Each child comes with unique strengths and limitations that require a particular response. For conflict to be truly educational, we must constantly adjust our response to match children's current level of social skill and understanding.

The continuum in Figure 10.1 sketches the range of problem-solving ability and the responses we might make to children at each level. Children clustered in the middle range will likely solve their problems with relative ease if we provide the necessary guidance and support. The Conflict Corner described in Chapter 3 and the Class Meetings described in Chapter 6 are useful structures for introducing children to the Talk It Out approach and for providing daily practice.

FIGURE 10.1
Strategies for Handling Conflict
Based on a Student's Problem-Solving Ability

Student Skill Level	Teacher Response
Unskillful	Teacher Directed: When the process breaks down, provide a cooling-off time. Present a solution. Establish a consequence and follow through if the problem recurs.
Practicing	Teacher-Assisted: Facilitate Talk It Out in the Conflict Corner or in a Class Meeting. Invite a third student to be the Peacemaker when two peers Talk It Out.
Skillful	Student-Directed: Students solve their problems on the spot with the teacher's help or independently.

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As children acquire more skill and experience, we step back and allow them to take increased responsibility for moving through the steps. Socially skillful children often can solve their problem on the spot, as described in Chapter 4, with minimal assistance from us. Our task with the most advanced students is to simply get out of the way and let them find solutions of their own. (Independent problem solvers are discussed in Chapter 5.)

Children with few social skills will require our attention and guidance for a longer time. It will take time to establish trusting relationships, to diagnose special needs, and, finally, to find encouraging ways to handle the conflicts they create. Chapter 9 explains how to work with children who are not ready to take responsibility for solving their social problems.

In each case, we offer only as much assistance as children need to be successful—no more, no less. We assess the child's ability and hold each kite with the tension needed to help it fly to its maximum height.

How Serious Is the Issue?

Although the unskillful and skillful categories described in Figure 10.1 may be useful in selecting a response to conflict, it is important to remember that a child's problem-solving ability changes from conflict to conflict and from day to day. We should expect that if our efforts to teach conflict resolution skills succeed, children will gradually move toward the skillful end of the continuum and require less assistance from us. The content of the conflict also figures into how skillful a student can be at any particular time. The content of a conflict is important. Is the issue minor or serious? Did Rosa accidentally trip over Carlos's foot on the way to the pencil sharpener, or did Carlos trip Rosa on purpose because she insulted his mother? How we respond depends on whether Carlos and Rosa are lukewarm about what happened or boiling mad.

Minor issues are more easily resolved, often without our involvement. Carlos says "excuse me" and Rosa continues on her way. However, even the most skillful and experienced problem solvers (children and adults alike) "lose their cool" when sufficiently threatened. If Carlos tripped Rosa because she insulted his mother, you will no doubt be needed to help the two cool off and formally Talk It Out.

If, on the other hand, Rosa is the fourth person Carlos "accidentally" tripped that day, you may have to take direct action to stop Carlos's hurtful behavior. Carlos might be moved away from his peers until he can keep his feet under his desk.

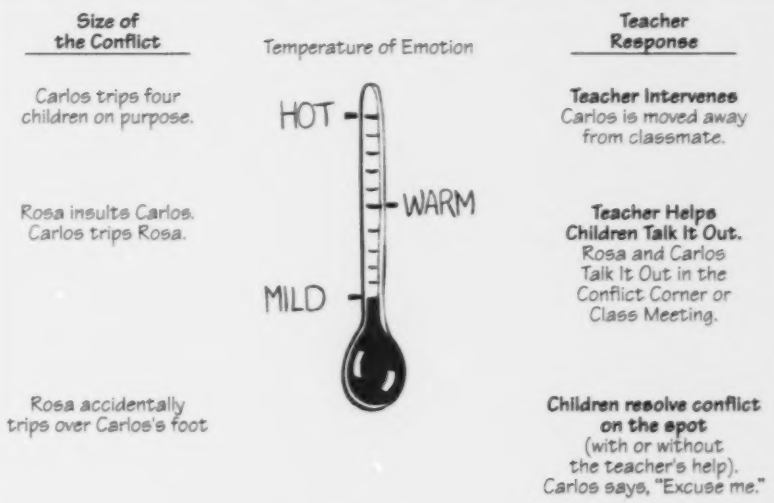
The Conflict Thermometer in Figure 10.2 on the next page summarizes how your response to Rosa and Carlos changes under different circumstances. The more serious the issue, the greater the intensity of emotion, and the more need for a third person to guide and structure the problem-solving process.

When my students first learned about conflict resolution, they tended to perceive every problem as a big deal. Children lined up to resolve the most minor issues—pencil swiping, losing their place in line, an unintentional bump. As frustrating as this was for me, they were in fact demonstrating mastery of the first lesson I had taught. They knew what conflict was, and now that I had made their social problems a legitimate concern in our classroom, they were eager to exercise their right to reconcile.

What they failed to understand, and what I failed to mention in those early discussions, is that all conflicts are not equally important. Having sensitized

children to conflict situations, it then became necessary to teach them to discriminate between petty issues that are best ignored and larger problems that warranted the time, attention, and skills we were working so hard to master.

FIGURE 10.2
Conflict Thermometer for Teachers


Size of the Conflict
Temperature of Emotion
Teacher Response
Carlos trips four children on purpose.
HOT
Teacher intervenes
Carlos is moved away from classmate.
Rosa insults Carlos.
Carlos trips Rosa.
WARM
Teacher Helps Children Talk It Out.
Rosa and Carlos Talk It Out in the Conflict Corner or Class Meeting.
MILD
Rosa accidentally trips over Carlos's foot
Children resolve conflict on the spot
(with or without the teacher's help).
Carlos says, "Excuse me."

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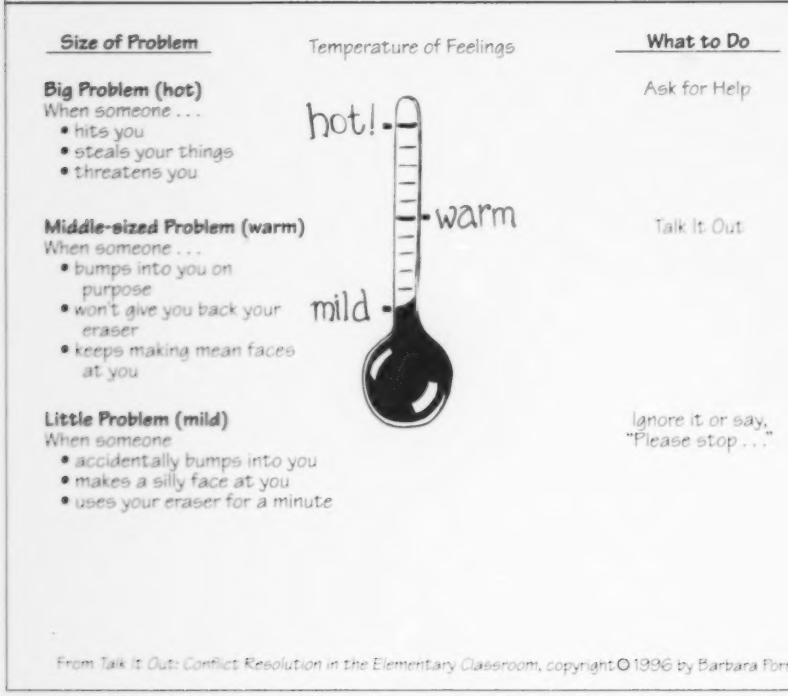
Teaching Children to Discriminate

The thermometer metaphor that helped me adjust my response to conflict proved to be useful in helping children gauge the size of their problems and choose an appropriate response. I took up the topic at writing time.

"When you are having a conflict with someone," I began, "the first thing to decide is—how big is the problem? Problems often come in three sizes: little, middle-sized, and big." I drew a thermometer on the board, marked three lines on it, and labeled them as shown in Figure 10.3.

"When little problems happen, you get a little upset for a short time, and then the problem goes away." I colored the thermometer to the line marked "little problems" and asked the class to name some little conflicts that happen at school. I recorded their examples on the thermometer: when someone accidentally bumps into you, when someone uses your eraser for a minute, when someone makes a silly face at you.

FIGURE 10.3
Conflict Thermometer for Children


Size of Problem
Temperature of Feelings
What to Do
Big Problem (hot)
When someone . . .
• hits you
• steals your things
• threatens you
Ask for Help
hot!
warm
mild
Middle-sized Problem (warm)
When someone . . .
• bumps into you on purpose
• won't give you back your eraser
• keeps making mean faces at you
Talk It Out
Little Problem (mild)
When someone
• accidentally bumps into you
• makes a silly face at you
• uses your eraser for a minute
Ignore it or say, "Please stop . . ."

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"What's the best way to handle little problems?" I asked the class. The children decided that little problems sometimes go away by themselves if you don't make a big deal about them.

"Sometimes people bug you just to see what you'll do, and if you ignore them, they get bored and stop. Or sometimes people don't know they're bothering you, and if you ask them nicely to stop, they will."

Next we discussed middle-sized problems, which make you more upset and don't go away so easily. I colored the thermometer to the middle line to show emotions heating up. Again I recorded students' example of middle-sized problems: when someone bumps into you on purpose, when someone won't give you back your eraser, or when someone keeps making mean faces at you.

We decided little problems sometimes become middle-sized problems when ignoring doesn't work.

"If someone makes fun of your name and you ignore it and they keep doing it again and again, the problem has grown to a larger size and you probably need to do something different. The best way to handle middle-sized problems is to Talk It Out with the person. You can sign up for Talk It Out time or, once you know how, you can Talk It Out by yourselves."

I then colored to the top of the thermometer.

"Oh yeah? Well, my problem was THIS big!"

"Big problems are serious and too difficult or hot to handle by yourself. You might be too angry, hurt, or scared to talk to the other person, or the other person might not be willing to listen to you. Or maybe the conflict is about something that is dangerous or against the law."

"Like if someone has a gun?" Dennis asked. At this point the children took off on a spirited discussion of all the scary and dangerous possibilities they had heard about. We decided it is a very big problem if someone has a weapon or drugs. Finally, I turned the discussion back to naming the big problems encountered on our playground: when someone hits you, takes your things, or threatens to hurt you.

"The best way to handle big problems," I advised, "is to ask an adult for help. So, if someone hurts you or scares you or is doing something dangerous, tell a teacher or your parents."

The last point of the discussion led to a writing activity.

"Everyone is different. A little problem for you might be a bigger problem for someone else. Some people like to be chased on the playground while other people hate it. Chasing is no problem for some, and it's a middle- or big-sized problem for others."

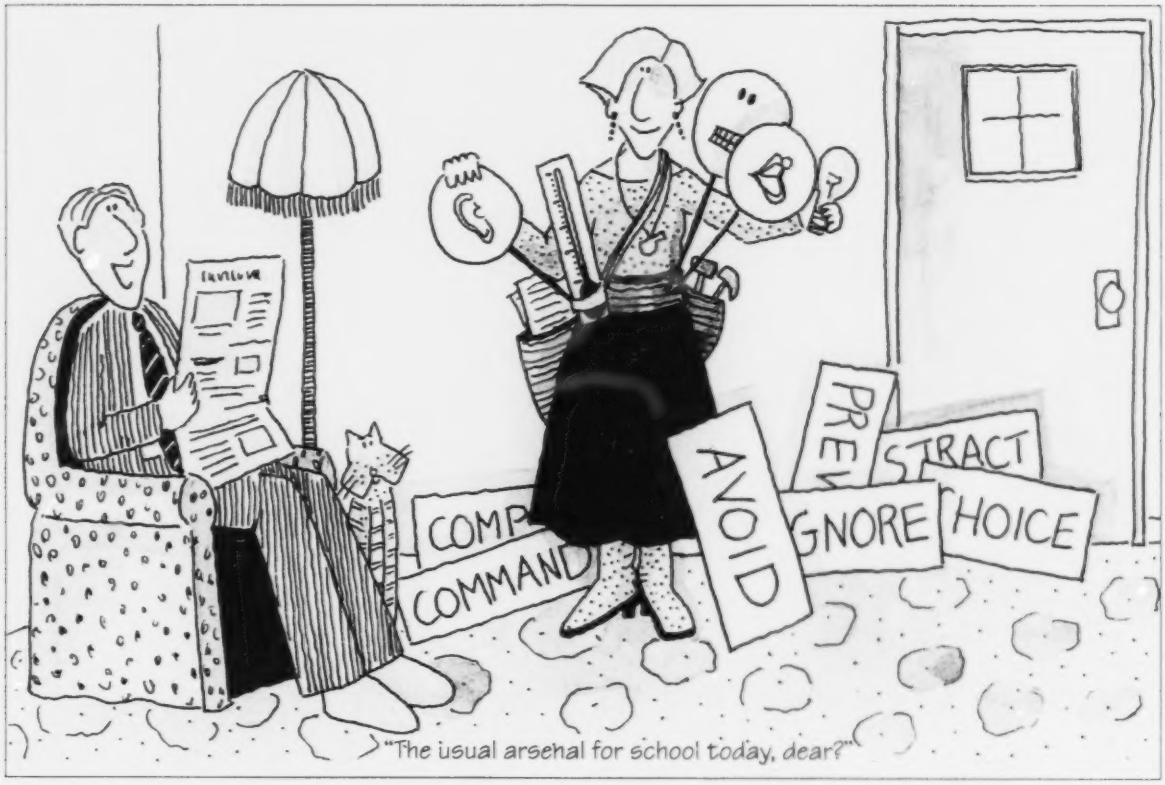
I explained the assignment: "Today I want to find out about the problems you have at school. Write a story about a little, middle-sized, and big problem and how you might handle each."

Next I distributed a story starter with the following open-ended sentences:

- It's a little problem for me when. . . . I can ignore it.
- It's a middle-sized problem for me when. . . . I can Talk It Out.
- It's a big problem for me when. . . . I ask the teacher for help.

The activity ended with children reading their stories aloud to the class. This deepened everyone's understanding of how individual classmates perceived a variety of conflict situations, and it firmly established the three categories of conflicts and choices of response in everyone's mind.

Once again, the whole business of teaching children about conflict resolution had turned out to be more time intensive than I had imagined. I was, however, teaching concepts I would refer to again and again, concepts that eventually saved time. After this discussion, when children reported their conflicts, I paraphrased their feelings and thoughts as always and then simply asked, "Do you think the problem's little, middle-sized, or big?" Though some were certain the problem was hefty enough to warrant my involvement, others smiled and shrugged, "It's just middle-sized. I can probably Talk It Out myself." Letting children know I cared and reminding them of their options was sometimes enough to encourage them to handle it on their own.



"The usual arsenal for school today, dear?"

11

Problem Solving Isn't the Only Way

If the only tools you have are hammers,
every problem begins to look like a nail.
—Abraham Maslow

Though problem solving is a powerful strategy for resolving classroom conflict, it has a serious downside. Talk It Out takes time, and time is a precious commodity at school. Indeed, if we attempted to talk about every little thing that went wrong during the schoolday, we probably wouldn't have time to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Often, a quicker response is more expedient and appropriate. Some issues are too minor to spend much time talking about. Other situations are nonnegotiable or must be handled immediately. What, then, are our options for handling "unimportant" issues or for dealing with conflict when time is short and immediate action is necessary?

The Secret to Success

Parent educators Susan Beekman and Jeanne Holmes point out the importance of having a wide range of options for responding to conflict. The more strategies at your fingertips, the more effectively you handle the variety of situations children present. When one strategy fails, you have others to try. In their parenting book *Battles, Hassles, Tantrums and Tears,* Beekman and Holmes present a collection of practical ways to cope with conflict and make peace at home. In addition to the problem-solving approach, the authors recommend giving commands, offering choices, finding compromise, and avoiding the problem altogether. The strategies they suggest for parents have been adapted here for classroom use.

Strategy 1: *Give Commands*

Using a respectful tone of voice, give clear directions, stating specifically what you want the child to do. For example:

- You're late for the assembly and three arguments break out in line. In a clear, authoritative voice, you give a command: "Freeze and look at me! When everyone is quiet we will go to the assembly."
- A ball flies over the fence, and you notice two children starting to scale it. From the other side of the playground you shout, "Get off the fence, NOW!"

A direct command is appropriate when issues are important (when safety is involved, for example) and immediate action is necessary. Your tone of voice should be firm, yet kind. Firmness lets the child know you mean business; kindness communicates respect. If the child ignores your direct command, follow through with logical consequences that are respectful to the child.

Before delivering a command, tune in to your own emotions. If you feel heated about the situation, take a few deep breaths before directing children's behavior. Commands delivered in anger feel punishing to children and breed resentment and hostility.

Strategy 2: *Offer Choices*

State the desired behavior in simple terms along with the consequence for noncompliance. For example: In the middle of a spelling test, Bonnie heads for the bathroom again. You meet her at the door and whisper, "You can choose to finish the spelling test now or during recess. You decide." This strategy combines a command—"You must complete the spelling test"—with a consequence—"If you decide to leave the room now, you'll have to work during recess." Choices presented in this way help children understand they are responsible for their actions and the consequences that follow. If Bonnie finds herself doing spelling during recess, it is because of the choice she made, not because the teacher is mean.

The language of choice is especially useful with children who need direction but would resist a direct command. Though Bonnie must complete the spelling, she has some say in deciding when.

You also can offer children choices between two desirable options. Children who have completed their daily assignments might be asked, "Would you like to read or do puzzles?" Here again, children can exercise their preference within limits set by you.

Strategy 3: Find Compromise

Offer a solution that partially satisfies the needs of everyone. For example: You've lost track of time. The messy art project is in its final stages just as the recess bells rings. The kids stare at you, poised to dash out the door. You have a strong preference for cleaning up before they leave, so you cut a deal. "If we spend five minutes cleaning up right now, I'll give you an extra five when the bell rings."

Why go into lengthy dialogue if both sides can live with a quick compromise? When the issue is minor enough to let go of something, it is often possible to find a solution that satisfies everyone in part. Compromise teaches children they can't always have it their way, but at the same time it lets them know they have a right to assert their needs and have them taken into consideration. This give-and-take principle is an essential ingredient in all human relationships—personal as well as professional—and a valuable life lesson.

Making compromise solutions, like any problem-solving strategy, can be taught directly to children. After countless conflicts over limited resources, one 3rd grade teacher invited her class to brainstorm ways to decide how two children could use the same material. The children came up with this list of possibilities: play together, divide it in half, find something else to use, make a deal, or take turns.

Further discussion revealed that although many children were willing to compromise by taking turns, more arguing occurred when it came time to decide who should go first and how long each turn should last. The class eventually developed a coin-flipping procedure that everyone agreed was fair. A "How to Take Turns" poster (Figure 11.1), a coin, and an egg timer were stored in their Conflict Corner to be available whenever two children wanted

FIGURE 11.1
How to Take Turns

1. Decide how long each turn will last. Start the timer.
2. Flip a coin to see who goes first.
3. When the time is up, the second person starts the timer and begins.

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to use the same resources. This solution provides a wonderful example of how different strategies can be combined to produce creative and effective results. The teacher used the problem-solving process to help children think of ways to compromise.

Strategy 4: Avoid the Problem Altogether

We probably couldn't survive classroom life if we didn't know how to distract children from petty problems and redirect their attention to the task at hand. Everybody benefits if the teacher knows when and how to overlook small irritations and keep the class moving in a productive direction. When we sidestep minor dilemmas, there's more time and energy for bigger concerns. There are four ways to avoid conflict in the classroom: distract, smooth, ignore, and prevent.

Distract. Divert children's attention away from minor issues by asking them to focus on something else. For example, the class blows in from recess on an unusually windy day and begins tugging at your elbow and whining in your ear. You head for the piano and start up a familiar song. Or, when Stephen starts juggling his rhythm sticks at the end of music time, you hand him a box and ask him to quietly collect everyone's instruments.

Smooth. Gloss over or make light of the situation. For example, in the middle of a conversation with a parent on the playground, Nicole reports, "Lanesha won't let me play." You hold Nicole's hand and tell her in a soothing voice, "Well, the bell's going to ring in a minute anyway." Then finish your conversation with the parent.

Ignore. Choose not to address an unimportant issue by withholding attention. When Xavier sneaks a piece of gum into his mouth three minutes before dismissal, you look the other way. Or when there's so much noise in the room you're having trouble starting the Halloween party, you get out a book and read silently at your desk until peer pressure silences the room. You put down the book and begin the party. Ignoring can also be effective when a child's inappropriate behavior is specially designed to get attention. During storytime Willy expels gas in an especially flamboyant manner. Everyone giggles as he excuses himself and heads for the boys' room. Not missing a beat, you continue reading aloud.

We would love it, too, if children would ignore some of the minor irritations that surround them. Unfortunately, when children first learn about conflict resolution, they tend to see every conflict as major. Although that behavior may be appropriate for the beginner, we need to help more experienced students exercise discrimination and let unimportant issues go. The "Conflict Thermometer For Children" described in Chapter 10 is useful in teaching students to ignore petty problems.

A word of caution is in order here. Avoidance strategies come so naturally to most of us, they are often overused. Many seemingly trivial issues are very important to children. When we habitually gloss over irritating incidents, problems often go unresolved, recur, and grow. Use avoidance techniques sparingly.

"I forgot to tell them to line up."

Prevent. Structure an activity or arrange the environment to reduce or eliminate conflict. You can see some battles coming a mile away. Each time you fetch your class on the playground, there will be a small civil war at the front of the line. Everyone will fight over the new thing in the room—a special game, the chance to touch a visiting pet, who gets to play with a new student. After a sweaty game in P.E., they're all going to push and shove to get a long drink.

To avoid going through these difficult, yet predictable, conflict scenarios over and over again, get creative. Plan ahead. Think of a way to structure the situation that prevents the conflict from happening. For example, you could take five minutes before P.E. to explain the "getting drinks" procedure. "Children whose last names are in the first half of the alphabet will use the fountain by the restrooms. The last half will walk to the fountain by the library. The person behind the drinker will slowly count to five and tap the drinker softly on the shoulder when the turn is up. After you get your drink you may return to class or go to the end of the line for another turn." Then line everyone up for a dry run. Everyone counts to five aloud and practices a soft tap on their neighbor's shoulder.

Sound like a lot of trouble? That's nothing compared with the trouble that shows up if you don't take the time beforehand to establish a safe and fair routine. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Conflict prevention strategies are best mastered in the school of hard knocks. Veteran teachers' abilities to predict problems and circumvent disaster have been honed by years of mistakes. These are the tricks of the trade that often mystify beginning teachers. So, the next time you find yourself struggling with a persistent, recurring problem, take your troubles to the teachers' room, collect your colleagues, and brainstorm ideas. There may be a way to structure the activity, rearrange the children or furniture, or add or subtract something from the environment to prevent the conflict from happening again. Fellow teachers with decades of experience dealing with the exact same hassle are the most valuable, economical, and underused resource in the school community.

Which Option Is Best?

A well-equipped teacher develops many tools for dealing with conflict. When conflict occurs, she assesses the situation and uses the strategy that is most appropriate. She ignores a burp because she knows the giggles it precipitates will quickly fade. When two children play-fight in line, she pulls out her play hammer and tells them to "Knock it off!" When Sarah makes fun of Hillary's new braces, she helps Hillary express her hurt feelings directly to Sarah. The more options available, the more likely we will choose one that best fits the situation.

Most of us tend to operate on automatic pilot in the classroom. In the rush of activities, we don't have the presence of mind to stop, assess the situation, and think about the best way to handle it. We reach for a response we've

always used, those one or two strategies we're most comfortable with. It takes time to expand our skills to include new options. It takes a conscious effort to use the unfamiliar. It takes courage to take a chance on something so new.

"But how can you be sure you've won if someone doesn't lose?"

12 Toward a Talk It Out School

We have it in our power to begin the world again.
—Thomas Paine

By the end of the year, my students and I had coalesced into a living, breathing community in which conflicts were expected, differences were appreciated, and disagreements were handled. It wasn't until I met my next class the following fall that I realized how far those students and I had come. My new children were heading in the opposite direction. At the slightest provocation, they'd run to me and complain, then wait for me to fix it. Their frustration only mounted when I refused to participate in the get-'em-in-trouble game. I heard their tattled tales as cries for help—"Teach us how to Talk It Out!"

As for my former students, they looked a bit uneasy as they lingered outside my door. They showed me their new haircuts and reported the news, "There's no Talk It Out time in 3rd grade." Will it all be forgotten, I wondered? Their eyes begged the question, "Can your vision extend beyond your classroom, Ms. Porro?"

As director of the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center's School Project,* I had many opportunities to assist elementary teachers and principals in developing schoolwide programs. I worked in more than 25 schools over a 3-year period training teachers in the Talk It Out approach and, in some cases, providing ongoing support and assistance. Although most schools planned to fully implement the program, only a few were successful. As with any innovation requiring true change, implementation is easier said than done.

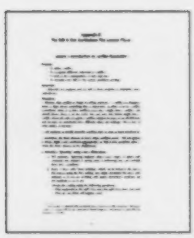
What Promotes Schoolwide Implementation?

I returned to the schools that had received training and observed in classrooms; interviewed teachers, principals, and students; and collected data through written questionnaires. Following is a summary of the conditions I consistently found in schools that successfully established schoolwide Talk It Out programs.

1. The philosophical assumptions of the principal and teachers were consistent with the principles underlying conflict resolution. That is, they believed that conflict is natural and, when approached with skill, can lead to positive outcomes; that children are capable of finding solutions to their social problems; and that the teacher's role is to encourage and guide students to discover answers of their own.

2. The principal and teachers saw the need for conflict resolution education and were motivated to implement the program.

3. The principal took a leadership role in establishing the program. That is, he or she met with the staff to assess needs, discuss goals, and collaboratively develop a comprehensive implementation plan. The principal also attended training sessions offered to the staff and consistently modeled the skills whenever conflicts occurred.



See Appendix B p. 119

4. Teachers were willing to set aside time to implement the program. They taught the five lessons that introduce the Talk It Out approach (Appendix B) and established a daily routine for disputing students to meet and Talk It Out. The program was initiated at a time when teachers could give it their full attention, not when they were preoccupied with other projects or concerns.

5. Teachers felt comfortable requesting and receiving support as they worked to internalize the new concepts and skills. That support often included follow-up visits by a trainer or mentor teacher to address implementation questions; regularly scheduled faculty or grade-level meetings to share ideas, assess progress, and brainstorm solutions to problems; and the establishment of support systems for teachers to meet and collaborate, such as coaching and feedback sessions.

*For more information about the School Project, contact the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center, 3 Waters Park Dr., Suite 206, San Mateo, CA 94403.

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The Vision: School Without Walls

I dream about a Talk It Out school that extends well beyond the classroom. Teachers, administrators, board members, parents, support staff, playground supervisors, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, after-school care providers, and community members—all who have contact with children—deliver the same message:

> Conflict is natural and likely to happen. When problems arise, fighting is prohibited. We expect you to talk about your problems and find respectful ways to solve them. We will help you learn to do that until you are able to do it by yourselves.

In the vision, adults, too, are constantly challenged to "walk the talk"—to open up communication, bridge differences, and cooperate in finding mutually beneficial solutions to the interpersonal problems they face daily.

The stakes are high. Violence in our culture is out of control. Conflict resolution lessons are not supplementary activities to enrich the future lives of children. Guns and violence have already arrived in many schools. For some, peacemaking skills are a matter of survival. When we embrace a common goal and consciously strive to practice the same principles and skills, our vision becomes reality.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
—Lao-Tzu

"I know it works in practice. But does it work in theory?"

Afterword

Seven Good Reasons You May Never Start This Program— And Seven Better Reasons Why You Should

If we are to reach real peace in this world . . .
we shall have to begin with the children.
—Gandhi

Since developing the Talk It Out approach, I have taught hundreds of teachers throughout the United States to use the process in their classrooms. While many teachers tell wonderful stories of successful implementation, others report that they never got around to it. Following are the top seven reasons why you may not get around to it either.

1. I can't find the time.

Having heard this popular reason so many times, I can assure you that you will never find the time to teach conflict resolution. Conflict resolution has to be so important that you take time to teach it as assertively as you take time to teach reading, writing, and math. (Can you imagine telling parents you couldn't find time to teach their child to read?)

As with any worthwhile skill, it takes time to teach children to handle their problems responsibly. Handing down solutions, giving lectures, and offering advice will almost always feel quicker and easier than conflict resolution. It's easier to pick up litter, too, than to teach children to take care of their own trash, but we all know where that leads.

2. It's not my job.

Our hefty job description usually doesn't explicitly require us to teach children to get along with one other. We're paid to teach academics; someone else is supposed to handle emotional and social-skill development. The trouble is, a growing number of children arrive at our door without knowing how to participate responsibly in the social life of a classroom. When conflicts arise, children do what they've always done: hit, tease, tattle, and call each other names. Children can't learn when they're distracted by the anger, hurt, and fear that accompany unresolved problems. We can't teach when we're constantly interrupted by children's social problems. It may not be our job to teach conflict resolution, but our job becomes nearly impossible if we don't help students learn to settle their own disputes.

3. My children can't do this.

Have you ever seen two children in conflict think of a solution that satisfies them both? For that matter, have you ever seen two angry adults have a respectful conversation that ends with a handshake and a smile? If your conflicts don't end happily, you may be muttering, "This sounds nice, but it can't work. Certainly not with my kids."

It is difficult to teach something you don't believe is possible. If that is the case, you may have to fake a new attitude. The next time children approach you with a conflict, act as if you believe they can think of a fair way to resolve it. Tell them in your most convincing tone of voice, "There are many ways to solve this problem. I know you are perfectly capable of finding a solution that works well for both of you."

4. They'll just unlearn it at home.

Aggression is modeled in many homes and neighborhoods. The media preach violence. Children are naturally attracted to the high drama of the blood-and-guts, win-or-die response to conflict. How can we possibly turn the tide when the water is moving so swiftly in the other direction? The fact that nonviolent approaches to conflict are not highly visible does not mean children cannot learn peaceful responses to conflict while they are at school. Children don't raise their hands and line up at home, yet they learn the "school way" to ask for attention and move through the halls. If we establish clear and reasonable expectations, teach children how to meet those expectations, and support children as they change, they will learn.

"Mommies and daddies don't need to Talk It Out. They have lawyers."

Once children learn to Talk It Out, we are at least rewarded with a more peaceful, respectful classroom in which to live and work. Improving the quality of life at school is not a trivial goal. At best, children may choose a peaceful response to the problems they face outside school, too. They certainly can't make such choices if they don't know how.

5. I don't feel comfortable trying something so new.

No question about it, the lessons in this program are as new to many of us as they are to children. If you have not used conflict resolution strategies in your personal life, how can you teach them to students? It is not easy to teach a new subject, especially one that requires you to change. You'll need to make a conscious effort to respond to conflict as an opportunity for learning rather than dismiss it as a nuisance. No book or workshop can prepare you sufficiently. You are likely to feel awkward and uncomfortable at first. Don't worry about doing it right. Mistakes are expected. In fact, start before you're ready. If you wait until you feel confident, you may never begin. It's like learning anything new. Trust the process. With practice you will improve. In the words of Koberg and Bagnall (1981), "Experience is the best teacher. You can only be at home with what you discover for yourself to be true."

6. I don't have any support.

You are not likely to master this new approach overnight. Growth is always punctuated by setbacks. Where will you turn when questions arise? If no one is around to support you when you're stuck, it is tempting to give up. Like any problem to be solved, establishing a supportive environment requires focus and determination. Identify others in your school community with the same interests and goals. Partner with another teacher. Coach and support each other. Figure out what you need and ask for help.

7. I have my own way.

No doubt you have a way of responding to conflict or else you wouldn't be surviving classroom life. The question is, what does your response teach children? Are they learning that social problems are not important? That conflicts end with someone in trouble? That if they go to the teacher they risk being called a tattletale?

If your approach teaches children to resolve their conflicts peacefully, your way is probably just as effective as the approach suggested here. There is nothing sacred about this program. These ideas are offered as one possible starting place. How we encourage children to think creatively about the problems they face is limited only by our imagination.

The Talk It Out Payoff

If conflict resolution takes time, isn't required, feels unnatural to you and your students, and goes against the culture at large, why bother teaching it? Following are seven of many reasons why the Talk It Out approach pays off for so many teachers and students.

1. Conflict resolution education saves time.

In the words of William Kreidler, well-known author of *Creative Conflict Resolution*, "If you take time to teach conflict resolution, you'll eventually have more time to teach." Think back to the first week of school. Remember how much time you spent teaching students how to line up, get drinks, sharpen pencils, clean the room, and store materials? You are willing to spend quite a bit of time and effort teaching children daily routines because it's a good investment. By midyear, the fire bell rings and, on a good day, everyone shuffles out the door without a word from you.

The same is true with conflict resolution. Initially we must take time to teach basic concepts and skills and introduce the problem-solving process. When conflicts arise, we must be available to guide students as they struggle with the steps. Eventually many children acquire the skill they need to settle their disputes without us.

As far as finding the time to begin this program, here's a perceptual trick you may find helpful. Add up all the minutes you currently spend each day

listening to tattled tales and complaints, plus the time it usually takes to give your response. That is your current conflict resolution program. Now, using the same number of minutes, substitute this new approach. You will find it takes no longer to encourage children to think about solutions than the response you are using today.

Conflict has a way of stealing school time whether it's in your plan book or not. Why not handle conflict in a consistent way that teaches children to eventually solve problems on their own?

2. Conflict resolution education teaches valuable skills.

This process is a clever way to get children to apply the skills we work so hard to develop during other subjects. As children Talk It Out, they are also communicating thoughts and feelings, taking turns, listening respectfully, analyzing problems, thinking critically, brainstorming solutions, predicting outcomes, making decisions, developing plans, and testing them out in real life. They are also learning good citizenship skills that will help them participate responsibly in a culturally diverse, democratic society. Not bad for an impromptu lesson.

Each time you find yourself spending valuable time helping two children settle their differences, think of it as a tutoring session in communication and higher-order thinking skills. Children never become bored with the material, and because the content is drawn from their personal experience, they have little trouble transferring the skills to real life. In addition, the children who need these skills most will naturally show up for more practice.

3. Conflict resolution education teaches children to care about others and treat them respectfully.

In order to find solutions that are mutually satisfying, children must cooperate. They must listen openly, look at the situation from another's perspective, share ideas, and develop a plan that takes everyone's needs and feelings into consideration. These activities lead to an understanding that "other" is just as important as "self." As children work together to reconcile their differences, they strengthen their sense of compassion and connection with others.

4. Conflict resolution education reduces stress.

Many teachers report a tremendous sense of relief at not having to play "fixer" for the myriad problems reported each day. Once students learn to solve problems on their own, you're off the hook. No more figuring out who started it, who did what to whom and why. No more lectures or forced apologies. It's not up to you to come up with answers or consequences. From now on, children's problems belong to children. Your job is to remain neutral. Once this new role really sinks in, you'll notice your emotional load lighten considerably.

5. You can use your new skills at home with family and friends.

The conflict resolution process you use with students works just as well with conflicts in your personal life. The more you Talk It Out in your classroom, and the more comfortable you become with the process, the more likely you are to reach for it when sticky situations come up at home. There is no better way to learn a new skill than to teach it. And what safer place to practice something new than the privacy of your classroom with a bunch of kids?

6. Conflict resolution education may contribute to the prevention of drug and alcohol abuse.

When we continually tell children what's right, what's wrong, and what to do when they have a problem, they learn to look outside themselves for answers. For a while they comply with our wishes, but before long they look to their peers for what to think. Children whose locus of control is external are more easily led by peer influence and are at high risk for drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and gang-related activity.

Conflict resolution teaches children to think for themselves. It lets them know that it's normal to be angry, unhappy, and afraid sometimes, and that there are responsible, nonviolent ways to express those feelings. It teaches children that when they have a problem, they need a plan, not an excuse or an escape. Children who responsibly handle their problems are assertive and self-reliant, displaying a healthy sense of personal power.

7. You can feel good about making a contribution to world peace.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed and helpless in these troubled times of drug abuse, domestic violence, hate crimes, and international turmoil. What's a concerned citizen to do? Teachers are among the lucky because we can and do make a difference. Each day we have the opportunity to teach children how to participate responsibly in a dynamic classroom community that prepares them to lead more peaceful, productive lives as adults. When more people know how to control their aggressive inclinations, listen to differing points of view, and develop solutions to problems that respect the needs and feeling of everyone involved, the world will truly become a better place to live.

There are good reasons for and against taking time to teach students nonviolent responses to conflict. In the end it comes down to this: You can have a list of good reasons why you never got around to teaching it, or you can have your students resolving their conflicts peacefully. That's the choice.

Selected Resources for Elementary Teachers

Classroom Management and Discipline

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Nelsen, J. (1987). *Positive Discipline.* New York: Ballantine Books.

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Conflict Resolution Curriculums

Cheatham, A. (1989). *Annotated Bibliography for Teaching Conflict Resolution in Schools.* Amherst, Mass.: N.A.M.E. (Available from N.A.M.E., 205 Hampshire House, Box 33635, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01002.)

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The Community Board Program. (revised 1995). *Classroom Conflict Resolution Training for Grades 3–6.* San Francisco, Calif.: The Community Board Program. (Available from The Community Board Program, 1540 Market St., Suite 490, San Francisco, CA 94102.)

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Sadalla, G., M. Holmberg, and J. Halligan. (1990). *Conflict Resolution: An Elementary School Curriculum.* San Francisco, Calif.: The Community Board Program.

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Wichert, S. (1989). *Keeping the Peace: Practicing Cooperation and Conflict Resolution with Preschoolers.* Philadelphia, Pa.: New Society Publishers.

General Reading/Adult Conflict

Crum, T. (1987). *The Magic of Conflict.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Fisher, R., and W. Ury. (1981). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreements Without Giving In.* New York: Penguin Books.

Fisher, R., and W. Ury. (1988). *Getting Together: Building a Relationship That Gets to Yes.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Koberg, D., and J. Bagnall. (1981). *The Universal Traveler.* Los Altos, Calif.: William Kaufmann.

Parent Education

Beekman, S., and J. Holmes. (1993). *Battles, Hassles, Tantrums & Tears: Practical Strategies for Coping with Conflict and Making Peace at Home.* New York: Hearst Books.

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Faber, A., and E. Mazlish. (1980). *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk.* New York: Avon Books.

Faber, A., and E. Mazlish. (1987). *Siblings Without Rivalry.* New York: Avon Books.

Peer Mediation

The Community Board Program. (1992). *Starting a Conflict Managers Program.* San Francisco, Calif.: The Community Board Program. (Available from The Community Board Program, 1540 Market St., Suite 490, San Francisco, CA 94102.)

The Community Board Program (revised 1995). *Conflict Managers Training Manual for Grades 3–6.* San Francisco, Calif.: The Community Board Program. (Available from The Community Board Program, 1540 Market St., Suite 490, San Francisco, CA 94102.)

Appendix A

A Sample Time Line for Implementing a Talk It Out Program

Week 1: Present the five lessons.

Before you can expect students to resolve their conflicts peacefully, you must formally teach them how. The Talk It Out curriculum in Appendix B introduces children to conflict resolution and walks them through the six steps of the problem-solving process.

Set aside one week of social studies time to present the five lessons. Each lesson takes approximately 20 minutes, though you may wish to take more time with lessons of particular interest or to extend a lesson into other curriculum areas. (Refer to the Selected Resources section for information on additional lesson plans and activities.) Feel free to adapt the materials to make them more relevant and appealing to your students. You know best what your students need. The lessons are aimed at a 2nd or 3rd grade level, but the concepts and skills are sophisticated enough for any age.

Week 2: Establish a routine in which students who are having conflicts can meet and Talk It Out.

The Monday after you present the five lessons, don't be surprised if your students still retaliate and tattle when problems arise. Children can't read either after a brief exposure to the alphabet; they need lots of guided practice before the skills become internalized. The same is true with conflict resolution.

You can incorporate conflict resolution into your daily program in a number of ways. Invite students to Talk It Out during a regularly scheduled time in the Conflict Corner or during a Class Meeting. Peer Peacemakers can eventually take your place as facilitators of the process.

As students acquire more skill and experience, gradually wean them from their dependence upon you. Help children solve their problems on the spot or encourage them to find solutions without your assistance. These options are summarized below.

Option 1: Conflict Corner. Establish a private place in the room where Talk It Out will take place. Invite students to help create the space. The more involved they become in setting it up, the more ownership they feel and the more likely they'll see it as their place to solve problems rather than something imposed by you. Call the space whatever you like—the Conflict Corner, Peace Place, Talk It Out Table. Post charts reminding students how to use the space appropriately. The How to Talk It Out, I-message, and Rules posters can be found in Appendix E. Notice that the How to Talk It Out poster comes in two formats—the six-step version in Appendix E and the simplified four-step

version with pictures in Appendix F. Although the picture poster was originally designed for children in the primary grades, many upper-grade students enjoy its simplicity.

This private space for Talking It Out could also be portable. Put the posters on a clip board or in a box. Define the space with a throw rug that can be rolled up afterwards.

You may wish to use additional props in the Corner to support children's movement through the steps. The pictures of the mouth and ear (Appendix H) can be mounted on sticks and held in turn as children talk and listen in Step 2. The Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet (Appendix D) is helpful for recording ideas.

Set up a policy for use of the Corner. Block out 10 to 15 minutes daily to meet with students to Talk It Out. Post an appointment sheet for children to sign. When Conflict Corner time arrives, assign the rest of class a quiet, independent activity. Meet with students who have requested help and guide them through the steps using the Facilitator's Script in Appendix C. Provide students with only as much support as they need to be successful. Remember that your goal is to empower children to solve their problems without you.

Option 2: Class Meetings. If children feel comfortable discussing their conflict publicly, invite them to Talk It Out during a class meeting. The two disputants move through the steps while the rest of the class watches and learns. Everyone is welcome to join in the brainstorming session. Everyone follows the rules. Clapping at the end validates the contribution the disputants have made to the class.

Option 3: Peer Peacemaker. Turn the facilitator's role over to students. Using the Peer Peacemaker's Script (Appendix K) as a guide, teach students to help classmates Talk It Out in the Corner, during a Class Meeting, or whenever conflict occurs.

Later: On-the-Spot Problem Solving. The more experience you and your students have Talking It Out, the more skillful everyone becomes and the quicker the process moves. A few quick questions eventually will be enough to guide children into developing solutions as problems arise, with minimal assistance from you. Quick Scripts for Solving Problems On the Spot can be found in Appendix I.

Later Still: Independent Problem Solving. With enough guided practice, many children eventually will be able to Talk It Out without your assistance. When skillful children report their conflicts, refer them to their own resourcefulness using the suggestions in Appendix J.

Appendix B
The Talk It Out Curriculum: Five Lesson Plans

Lesson 1: Introduction to Conflict Resolution

Purpose

- To define conflict.
- To recognize different responses to conflict.
- To look at the consequences of each response.
- To introduce the Talk It Out option (problem solving).

Materials

Optional: two puppets and toy ball or three students to dramatize demonstrations

Procedure

1. Discuss what conflict is. Begin by telling students, "A conflict is a disagreement or fight about something that is important. Another word for conflict is problem. Most of us have conflicts every day. I might have a conflict with myself about when to do my work. You and your best friend might have a conflict about the rules of a game. Conflicts happen because we are all different and because we sometimes have different ideas and feelings. This is part of what makes us human."

2. Ask students to briefly describe conflicts they've seen or been involved in.

3. Introduce the three choices we have when conflicts occur: "We can ignore it (deny), fight it out (confront aggressively), or Talk It Out (problem solve)." Write the three choices on the chalkboard.

4. Introduce "ignoring" using a story illustration.

A. Tell students, "Ignoring happens when you're angry or upset with someone, but instead of saying what is bothering you, you pretend there isn't a problem."

B. Read "A Story with Three Endings," which can be found at the end of this lesson, using the first ending. You might dramatize the story with puppets or, if you are working with upper elementary students, ask two students to act it out.

C. Discuss the ending using the following questions:
- What happened at the end? How does Sue feel? How does Tom feel?
- What do you think will happen next?

Note: Lesson 1 is adapted with permission from *Classroom Conflict Resolution Training for Grades 3–6*, revised 1995 by the Community Board Program, 1540 Market St., Suite 490, San Francisco, CA 94102.

- Have you ever tried to [ignore it, fight it out, Talk It Out] when you were having a problem?
- How did that work for you?
- Is [ignoring, fighting, or Talking It Out] a good way to solve a problem? Why or why not?

D. Summarize the consequences of ignoring: "When you ignore a problem you are having with someone it usually doesn't fix anything. You don't get a chance to tell your feelings and the other person never knows that something is bothering you. If the situation happens again, the same problem might happen again too."

You may wish to point out that ignoring can be effective in discouraging behavior intentionally designed to irritate. For example, if someone is making fun of another's name, the teaser will sometimes stop if the person being teased acts as if it doesn't bother him. The child being teased, however, may end up with leftover feelings of anger and frustration. Some teasers only become more irritating when their initial attempt to bother someone fails to get a rise. Ignoring sometimes works to stop the problem and sometimes only makes the problem worse.

5. Introduce "fighting" using a story illustration.

A. Tell students, "Fighting happens when you're angry or upset with someone and you are hurtful in return. You say or do something mean or you try to force the person to give you what you want."

B. As before, read or dramatize "A Story with Three Endings," this time using the second ending.

C. Discuss the ending using the same questions as above.

D. Summarize the consequences of fighting it out: "When you fight with someone you are having a problem with, the other person might fight back. You may get hurt or you might get into trouble, and, because there are no solutions, the problem gets worse for everyone. Later, you might feel sorry that you hurt someone and sad because the person may not want to be your friend. At other times the person might give you what you want, but later, that person may feel angry or resentful. The person may seek revenge or break off the relationship."

6. Introduce "Talk It Out" using a story illustration.

A. Explain to students, "Talk It Out means that when you're angry or upset with someone, you tell the person what is bothering you. You say it in a way that doesn't blame or hurt the person. Then you listen to what the other person has to say and find ways to solve the problem that make you both happy."

B. As before, read or dramatize "A Story with Three Endings," this time using the third ending.

C. Discuss the ending using the same questions as above.

D. Finally, summarize the consequences of Talking It Out: "When you tell someone what is bothering you and listen to what the other person

has to say, you can often solve the problem in ways that are fair to both of you. The situation improves. Hurt feelings go away and your friendship becomes stronger."

7. Discuss the importance of finding peaceful solutions to conflicts.

Preview the next four lessons:

- "When you have conflicts at school, we cannot allow you to fight. Why do you think this is a school rule?"
- "Instead, we want you to talk about your problems and find peaceful ways to solve them. For the next few days, we will be learning how."

Note: While this simplified lesson promotes Talk It Out as the best way to resolve conflicts, it is important for children to understand that problem solving may not always be appropriate. Children who encounter dangerous situations at home or in their neighborhoods must be taught to avoid conflict and protect themselves. Discuss a variety of conflict situations and help children determine the safest response.

A Story with Three Endings

It is recess and Tom is playing with a ball.
Sue walks over and asks if she can play.

Ending Number One

Tom doesn't want to play with Sue because she sometimes hogs the ball, and no one else gets a turn. Instead of saying anything, Tom says, "Okay," and throws the ball to Sue. Sue bounces the ball a few times, then kicks it to the far end of the playground. Sue runs after the ball, leaving Tom standing there. He shrugs his shoulders and walks away.

Ending Number Two

Tom doesn't want to play with Sue because she sometimes hogs the ball and no one else gets a turn.

Tom: No way!
Sue: Why not?
Tom: Because you cheat.
Sue: I do not! Now give me the ball. It's not just yours. It belongs to the whole class.
Tom: Well I got it first.
Sue: (grabbing the ball) I get a turn too! Give it to me!
Tom: NO!!

They struggle over the ball until a teacher breaks up the fight.

Ending Number Three

Tom doesn't want to play with Sue because she sometimes hogs the ball and no one else gets a turn.

Tom: No.
Sue: Well, that ball isn't just yours. It belongs to the whole class.
Tom: Yah, but sometimes you keep the ball and no one else gets a turn.
Sue: I won't keep the ball. We can play catch.
Tom: Okay.

He throws the ball to Sue. She catches it and returns it to Tom. They continue playing until the recess bell rings.

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Lesson 2: How to Cool Off

Purpose

- To help students recognize anger and frustration as normal feelings that often accompany conflict.
- To define cooling off—responsible, nonviolent ways to release upsetting emotions—and its importance in solving problems.
- To help students identify cooling-off strategies.
- Optional: To establish a Feelings Place in the room for cooling off.

Materials

- How to Talk It Out poster (Appendix E)
- Optional: a personal cooling-off story
- Optional: materials for a Feelings Place

Procedure

1. Help children recognize the feelings that surround conflict situations and their choices about how to express them.

A. Ask: "How do you know when you have a problem?" Answers may include: when you feel angry, frustrated, confused, hurt; when you feel like hurting someone or saying something mean; when you cry; when someone gets angry at you; when someone hurts you.

B. Acknowledge and explore anger (or any uncomfortable feeling) as a natural and appropriate response to conflict situations. Say something like, "Sometimes when you have a problem, anger is one of the emotions you feel. Anger is a signal that something is wrong. Anger tells you that you want something to change. It is normal to feel angry when things aren't working for you. Everyone feels angry at times." Then discuss, "What are some things that make you angry?"

C. Discuss ways of expressing anger: "When you are angry, you have two choices about what to do. You can express your anger in ways that make the problem bigger or you can use your anger to figure out what the problem is so you can solve it. Name some things people sometimes do with their anger that make the problem worse."

2. Introduce a positive way to handle anger, namely Step 1 of the Talk It Out process: stop and cool off.

A. Tell students, "Another way to express your angry feelings is to go to the person you're having the problem with and Talk It Out with him or her."

B. Show the How to Talk It Out poster (Appendix E) and explain, "Today we're going to learn about the first step in Talking It Out: stop and cool off. That means you stop yourself from doing anything hurtful and take time to cool off until you can speak calmly and think clearly."

C. Give students an example of cooling off. Read "Kenny Keeps His Cool" from the end of this lesson or tell a personal story in which you cooled off before resolving a conflict.

D. If you use the story, discuss it using the following questions (which can be adapted if you decide to use your own story):

- What do you think would have happened if Kenny hadn't walked away?
- What happened to Kenny's feelings while he was getting a drink?
- Why is cooling off an important first step?

3. Identify cooling-off strategies.

A. Brainstorm with students: "How can you help yourself feel better when you are angry or upset?" Record children's ideas on the board.

Any activity that removes or distracts children from the upsetting situation can be effective in calming them down: counting to 10, taking a few deep breaths, getting a drink, doing something physical, drawing a picture, imagining the anger blowing out the top of the head, talking to an understanding friend or adult about what happened. When Eskimo children feel tense, they are encouraged to stare at a bird or a fish. This activity removes the child from the disturbing situation in the same way a bird might take flight or a fish might swim away. The children are also taught to return to the problem later, just as the bird or fish returns.

If unacceptable ideas are named, evaluate the ideas later and cross out any harmful ones. For example, you might tell students, "Throwing things or taking drugs may ease discomfort temporarily, but they are destructive in the long run." Underscore the importance of choosing safe ways to cool off.

B. Establish acceptable ways to cool off at school. Ask students to think of cooling-off strategies they can use at school. Let students know if their suggestions are appropriate or not. For example, "Taking a walk is a good way to cool off, but I can't let you leave the room until recess."

C. Invent new ways to cool off in your classroom. Most classrooms are not organized to allow for cooling-off time or activities. Brainstorm additional ways your students can responsibly manage their anger. Older students might ask permission to sit outside or get a pass to the bathroom, the computer room, or the library. Young children enjoy a Feelings Place where they can release their emotions in ways that don't hurt or disturb anyone. Ask children for suggestions about what to put in the Feelings Place that will help them feel better (a rug to define the area, beanbag chair or rocker, tissues for crying, clay, a scribble pad and crayons, blanket, stuffed animal, book).

If necessary, tell children that they are responsible for completing any work missed while they are cooling off.

4. Discuss when to use cooling-off strategies. When children are angry or frustrated, some react so quickly they don't realize they have a choice about what to do. Because retaliation feels so right in the moment, they are also unaware that acting on anger aggressively is not in their best interests. The

following discussion will help children notice when they are angry, slow down the process, and make a conscious choice to cool off before acting.

A. Help children identify their early signs of anger. Ask students, "How do you know when you are getting angry? What happens in your body?" Answers might include: you feel like hurting someone, your heart pounds, your breathing changes, your muscles tense, your face gets hot, your fist gets tight, there's a lump in your throat or a knot in your stomach, your jaw clenches.

B. Ask students, "What situations make you feel angry, frustrated, or aggressive?"

C. Ask students, "What do you usually do when you become angry?"

D. Ask students, "What are some ways you can cool off at school?"

5. Preview the next lesson. Tell students, "Once you have cooled off, you are ready to go the person who upset you and calmly talk about the problem. Tomorrow we will learn how to tell someone about your angry feelings in ways that are respectful rather than hurtful."

Kenny Keeps His Cool

Kenny got a new baseball cap and was excited about showing it to his friends at school. While he was waiting for the bell to ring, Andy ran over, grabbed Kenny's cap, and threw it to Damon. Damon caught it and threw it back to Andy. "Hey, you guys, give me my cap!" Kenny yelled, jumping up and down. But the boys wouldn't stop. The more they threw it, the angrier Kenny got. The angrier Kenny got, the more Andy and Damon seemed to enjoy the game.

Then Kenny got an idea. He stopped yelling and walked to the water fountain and took a long drink. By that time the bell had rung. As he was lining up to go into the room, Andy put the cap on Kenny's head.

Kenny was still so mad at Andy he stayed away from him all morning. Finally, on the way to recess, Kenny walked over to Andy and said, "I don't like it when you take my cap. Don't do it again, okay?"

Andy shrugged his shoulders, "It was just a game."

That was the end of the problem.

Lesson 3: How to Talk About Feelings

Purpose

- To express feelings and needs in an assertive, nonthreatening way (I-message).

Materials

- How to Talk It Out poster (Appendix E)
- I-message poster (Appendix E)

Procedure

1. Introduce Step 2: Talk and listen to each other. Display How to Talk It Out poster. Tell students: "After you have taken time to cool off, you are ready to go to the person who upset you and talk about your feelings and what is bothering you."

2. Demonstrate the you-message and I-message. Tell students: "When you want to tell someone about your feelings, you can either give the person a you-message or an I-message." Write "You" and "I" on the board.

A. Role-play Skit Number 1, You-Message:

"First let's listen to a you-message. I'll play the part of someone who's angry and you [the whole class] play the part of the person I'm upset with. Pretend I am playing with a puzzle, and you are watching over my shoulder. You see where one of the pieces fits so you pick it up and put it into the puzzle. I get mad and yell, 'Stop it! You always wreck everything. Get out of here!'"

Discuss with students:

- "How did you feel when I said that?
- What do you think will happen next?"

B. Role-play Skit Number 2, I-message:

"Now, the same thing happens, only this time I will give you an I-message. I am playing with a puzzle, and you are watching over my shoulder. You see where one of the pieces fits so you pick it up and put it into the puzzle. I take a deep breath, then say, 'I feel annoyed when you touch my puzzle because I want to do it by myself.'"

Discuss with students:

- "How did you feel this time?
- What do you think will happen next?"

3. Discuss the differences between the you-message and the I-message.

A. Compare the two skits: "What was different about the two ways I talked to you? Which way did you like better? Why?"

Note: Lesson 3 is adapted with permission from *Classroom Conflict Resolution Training for Grades 3–6*, revised 1995 by the Community Board Program, 1540 Market St., Suite 490, San Francisco, CA 94102.

B. Summarize what's been presented:

1. "The first way of expressing anger was a you-message. You-messages make people feel you are blaming or judging them for doing something bad or wrong. You-messages are a put-down. When people hear you-messages, they often get angry and defensive. It's hard for them to hear what you are saying, and it's even harder for them to think about changing." You might want to note for students that the "you" in some messages is sometimes implied rather than directly stated. "Stop it!" really means "You stop it!"

2. Next tell students, "The second I-message tells other people how you feel without making them wrong. You take responsibility for your feelings and what is bothering you without putting the blame on them. When people hear I-messages, they may feel uncomfortable about upsetting you, but they don't feel like you are judging them as a bad person. I-messages make it easier for others to hear what you are saying and think about changing. When you want to Talk It Out with someone, it's better to use an I-message."

4. Introduce how to make I-messages.

Show the I-message poster or write the format on the board:

I _____ when you _____ because _____ .
(feeling) (specific behavior) (how it affects me)

Give students an example: "I feel frustrated when you interrupt because then I can't finish what I want to say."

Although the I-message is helpful in introducing children to assertive speaking skills, you don't need to use this exact formula. There are many equally effective ways to let others know their behavior is a problem without blaming or hurting feelings. Here are some examples:

- I don't like it when you _____ because _____.
- I feel _____ when you _____.
- When you _____ , I feel _____ because _____.
- It's a problem for me when you _____ because _____.
- It bothers me when you _____ because _____.
- I would like _____.
(what would make the situation better for me)
- I would appreciate it if you would _____.
(what would make the situation better for me)
- Please _____.
(make a request)
- I need_____.

5. Practice by putting students into pairs and asking them to take turns sending an I-message for these situations:

- You lent your friend a book and when it's returned, one of the pages is scribbled on.
- You're standing in line at the water fountain and someone pushes ahead of you.
- You are running in a race and someone calls you a slowpoke.
- A friend tells you she or he will play with you at recess, but when recess comes, she or he goes off with another friend instead.
- The friend you are with is telling you what to do and not listening to your ideas.

6. Discuss the importance of timing and presentation when communicating upset feelings. The key to expressing anger is to do it without being hurtful.

A. Say something like, "If you want someone to understand what is bothering you, you must talk to the person respectfully and at an appropriate time."

B. Then discuss: "When is a good time to give someone an I-message? When would be a bad time? What tone of voice will be most effective in helping the person hear what you say?"

7. Preview the next lesson. "Tomorrow we will learn about the second part of the talk-and-listen step—how to listen to the person with whom you are having a problem."

Lesson 4: How to Listen

Purpose

- To distinguish between good and poor listening behaviors.
- To identify and practice the elements of good listening.
- To relate listening to the Talk It Out process.

Materials

How to Talk It Out poster (Appendix E)

Procedure

1. Introduce "listen," which is the second part of Step 2. Display the How to Talk It Out poster. Tell students: "Step 2 tells us to 'talk and listen to each other.' Yesterday we practiced how to talk to someone we're having a problem with. Today we're going to learn how to listen to what the other person has to say to you."

2. Discuss the purpose of listening. Ask children to work in pairs: "Talk to your partner about why listening is important." Elicit responses from the groups, which may include the following: to get information, to learn, to find out how someone feels, to find out what someone needs, to enjoy, to share, to be close to someone.

3. Introduce the activity. "Imagine that you are talking to your partner about something that is important to you. How do you know if your partner is listening? This activity will help you find out."

A. *Part 1: Identify poor listening behaviors.* Tell students, "Let's learn about poor listening. Partner #1 tell Partner #2 about your favorite movie (TV show, book). Partner #2, do everything possible to show you are not listening." After two or three minutes, ask partners to tell each other how they felt in their roles. Then ask, "How did you know your partner was not listening? What are poor listening behaviors?" Write responses on board. Then reverse roles and repeat the activity. Add other poor listening behaviors to the list.

B. *Part 2: Identify good listening behaviors.* "Now, we're going to explore good listening behaviors. This time Partner #1 will tell about a favorite vacation (or other appropriate topic) and Partner #2 will do everything to show he or she is listening." After two or three minutes, ask partners to tell each other how they felt in their roles. Then ask, "How did you know your partner was listening? What are good listening behaviors?" Write responses on the board. Repeat the activity with roles reversed, and add other good listening behaviors to the list.

3. Relate good listening to Step 2 in the Talk It Out process.

A. *Discuss:* "How do most people listen in conflict situations? Why is that?" Usually, not much listening takes place during a conflict. That's because many people believe that only one person can be right. The line of reasoning goes like this, "If I listen to you, that means I agree

with what you're saying. If I agree with what you're saying, then I am admitting I am wrong." Listening sometimes feels like losing.

B. *Explore misconceptions about listening:* "Listening and understanding your point of view does not mean I agree with you. I can understand your perspective without giving up my own. Both our perspectives are valid and, in that sense, 'right.' "

C. *Discuss:* "Why is good listening important in a conflict situation? . . . Instead of arguing about who is right or wrong, it is better to listen to each other and find out how we feel and what we need. Then we will be able to think of solutions that will satisfy us both."

D. *Optional Activity:* Make a chart summarizing the good listening behaviors the class lists. The chart might include these behaviors: face the person, stay quiet until your turn, think about what the person is saying, and show you understand (facial expressions, nodding, restating, asking questions).

4. Preview last lesson. "Once we have talked and listened to each other and figured out what we both need, we can think of solutions to the problem that will make the situation better for both of us. Tomorrow we will learn how to find fair solutions."

Lesson 5: How to Find Fair Solutions

Purpose

- To define a problem in terms of need.
- To practice brainstorming.
- To practice evaluating and choosing win-win solutions.
- To establish a daily routine for disputing students to meet and Talk It Out.
- To introduce the rules of Talk It Out.

Materials

- How to Talk It Out poster (Appendix E)
- Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet (Appendix D)
- Rules poster (Appendix E)
- Sign-up Sheet

Procedure

1. Introduce Step 3: find out what you both need. Display the How to Talk It Out poster and tell students, "Whenever there is a problem, it is often because two people want (or need) different things."

A. *Demonstrate how to identify "my need" with the following discussion:* "Let's say I am reading a book and you are building a tower with blocks (or some other noisy activity). This is a problem for me because you're making a lot of noise, and it's hard for me to concentrate. I need quiet so I can concentrate on my reading."

B. *Demonstrate how to identify "your need" with the following discussion:* "If I want to solve the problem so that we are both happy, I must also find out what you need. What do you need?" Elicit a description of the problem from the child's perspective. For example, "I want to play with the blocks, and it's not fun to play without making noise."

C. *Summarize the problem in terms of need:* "By looking at both our needs we understand the whole problem." Write on the board: I want it quiet so I can read, and you want to play noisily with blocks.

2. Demonstrate Step 4: brainstorm solutions. Tell students, "After we find out what we both need, it's time to brainstorm ways to solve the problem."

A. *Define brainstorm for students:* "Brainstorming is a creative way of thinking. The best way to brainstorm is to come up with as many ideas as we can as quickly as possible without making any comments."

B. *Elicit ideas and write them on the board:* "Let's brainstorm ways to solve the problem. We'll think of as many ideas as we can. Silly ideas are okay, too."

Encourage children to come up with as many ideas as possible. Allow time to think. Keep restating the problem and asking, "What else could we do? What else?" Encourage everyone to participate. Remember that all ideas are acceptable.

3. Demonstrate Step 5: choose the idea you both like best. Tell students, "Now let's find out which ideas we both like."

A. *Read and evaluate each idea.* Beside each idea draw two faces labeled "You" and "Me." (Duplicate the format that appears on the Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet, Appendix D) Ask one child to play the part of "you." Fill in the faces beside each idea with a smile, frown, or straight line—depending on your responses. For example, the child's response to the idea "put blocks away" is probably a frown. Your response, on the other hand, might be a smile. A straight line face means the idea is so-so—not a favorite, but one that might work.

B. *Decide which idea is best for both.* Ask students, "Which idea is fairest to both of us? Why?" Put a check by the idea with two smiling faces or several checks if there is more than one. In the next step you can decide which of the win-win ideas you will incorporate into your plan.

4. Demonstrate Step 6: make a plan and go for it! Tell students, "In the last step, we talk about how to make our idea(s) work."

A. *Ask open ended-questions that make the solution concrete and specific.* For example, "Which idea or combination of ideas do we want to put into our plan? What needs to happen first? Then what? Who will do that? How are we going to do that? When? Where?" Keep in mind that good solutions are specific, realistic, balanced (both parties contribute), and satisfy the needs of everyone involved.

B. *Act out the execution of the plan.* Tell students, "Next, we each do what we've agreed upon and see how our plan works."

C. *Demonstrate reflection and evaluation.* Tell students, "Let's pretend our plan didn't work very well. Now what could we do?" You might return to the list of brainstormed ideas and choose a different idea or go back to Step 2 and redefine the problem.

5. Establish a daily routine for students to meet and Talk It Out.

Tell students where and when they can meet to Talk It Out. A regularly scheduled Talk It Out time with an appointment sign-up sheet is helpful in establishing a routine. You can set up a Conflict Corner where students can Talk It Out privately, or you can invite students to solve their problems during a Class Meeting. These options are fully described in Chapters 3 and 6. Peer Peacemakers can eventually replace you as facilitators of the process (Chapter 7).

Initially students will need your guidance in moving through the steps. Use the Facilitator's Script (Appendix C) to guide students into developing solutions. Offer only as much assistance as disputants need to be successful. As students acquire more skill and experience, many will eventually be able to solve their problems without you.

6. Introduce and discuss the rules of Talking It Out. (Additional ideas can be found in Chapter 3.)

A. Tell students that whenever they meet to Talk It Out, it's important to follow the guidelines on the Rules poster (Appendix E). Read each rule and discuss it as follows:

- Rule 1: Treat each other with respect. What does that mean? (no name calling or put-downs.) Why is that an important rule?
- Rule 2: Listen without interrupting. What does that mean? (no interrupting.) Why is that a good rule?
- Rule 3: Work to solve the problem. What does that mean? (being helpful, cooperative; following through with agreements) Why is that a good rule?"

B. Underscore the importance of following the rules by making it clear that "only people who follow the rules are invited to Talk It Out."

Appendix C

How to Help Children Talk It Out: Facilitator's Script

Don't blame. . . . Don't judge. . . . Don't fix it. . . . Don't give advice. . . . Don't take responsibility away from children.

Teacher Helps Disputants . . .

1. Stop. Cool Off.

- When a child reports a conflict, listen. Restate.
- Provide a cooling-off time/activity if necessary. Ask, "What would help you feel better?"

2. Talk and Listen to Each Other.

- Meet with both students.
- Ask the first child: "What's the problem? How are you feeling?" Restate.
- Help the first child practice direct communication. Use I-message if appropriate.
  "Tell _____ how you are feeling and why. Start with I."
  "I _____ (feeling) when you _____ (specific action) because _____ (how it affects me)."
- Ask the second child the same as above.
- Optional: Check for understanding. Say to each child, "Tell me what you heard (the other child) say."

3. Find Out What You Both Need.

- Summarize what you heard. Point out common interests. State problem in terms of need. "So it sounds like (the first child) needs _____ and (the second child) needs _____. Right?"

4. Brainstorm Solutions.

- Ask both, "What could you do to solve the problem?"
- Elicit many ideas as quickly as possible without comments. Keep track of children's ideas. If there are lots of ideas, write them down. Accept all ideas without making judgments.
- Keep children's attention focused on developing solutions. "Yes, you could _____. What else could you do?"

5. Choose the Idea You Both Like Best.

- For each idea, ask both children, "Does that work for you?"
- Help children choose a win/win solution. Ask, "Is the problem solved?"

6. Make a Plan. Go for It!

- Ask questions that elicit a specific action plan: "What will you do? What needs to happen first? Then what?"
  "How are you going to _____? When? Where? Who?
  "If this happened again, what could you do differently?
- Congratulate children on their hard work.

Later, Help Children Reflect and Evaluate. "How did your solution work?"

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Appendix D

Brainstorm Solutions Worksheet

The Problem: What can you do right now so that . . .

_____ & _____?

Child #1 gets what s/he needs — Child #2 gets what s/he needs

How we feel about the idea . . .

	Ideas	name	name
☐	_____	○	○
☐	_____	○	○
☐	_____	○	○
☐	_____	○	○
☐	_____	○	○
☐	_____	○	○
☐	_____	○	○

✓ Check the ideas you both like best.

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Appendix E
Talk It Out Posters

How to Talk It Out

1. Stop. Cool off.
2. Talk and listen to each other.
3. Find out what you both need.
4. Brainstorm solutions.
5. Choose the idea you both like best.
6. Make a plan. Go for it!

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Appendix E
Talk It Out Posters
(continued)

I-Message

I _____
(feeling)

when you _____
(specific behavior)

because _____ .
(how it affects me)

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Rules

1. Treat each other with respect.
2. Listen without interrupting.
3. Work to solve the problem.

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Appendix F

How to Talk It Out: Four-Step Version

1. Stop. Cool off.

2. Talk and listen.

3. Think of ways to solve the problem.

4. Choose the idea you both like.

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Appendix G

How to Help Young Children Talk It Out: Facilitator's Script

Young children's conflicts must be handled as they occur or else children will forget what happened. No need for privacy at this age. Bystanders are welcome to offer ideas.

1. Stop. Cool Off.

Skip "cool off" unless there has been violence or uncontrollable anger. Stop any aggressive behavior and proceed. If the children are arguing about a toy or object, hold the object temporarily to "neutralize" it.

2. Talk and Listen.

- Gently round up children and begin. Get on children's level. Speak calmly.
- Ask Child #1, "What happened?" Restate. Help the child express feelings directly to Child #2: "Tell (the second child) how you are feeling. Start with I." If the child won't talk about feelings, describe how he or she appears or talk about how you (the teacher) might feel. If necessary, "feed" the child an I-message.
- Ask Child #2, "What happened?" Restate. Help the child express needs (or feelings) directly to Child #1: "Tell (the first child) what you want." If the child has been aggressive, say, "I can't let you hurt others. What did you want when you _____ (the first child)."
- Summarize the problem in terms of need. "It sounds like (the first child) wants _____and (the second child) wants _____." Or say, "It sounds like you both want . . ."

3. Think of Ways to Solve the Problem.

- Ask both: "How can you solve the problem so you'll both be happy?" When one child offers an idea, ask the other child, "Is that okay with you?" If a child says no, ask, "What idea do you like better than that?" Continue eliciting ideas and checking them out with the other child.
- If necessary, invite bystanders to offer ideas. Ask, "Does anyone have an idea for (child number one) and (child number two)?"
- Don't rush this step. Creative thinking takes time.

4. Choose the Idea You Both Like Best.

- Continue with Step 3 until children arrive at a solution they both like.
- Help children make a plan. Ask, "Who will go first?" or "How will you share it?"
- Offer congratulations: "You worked hard to solve your problem!"

Note: Special thanks to Sue Dinwiddie for these suggestions for working with young children.

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Appendix H

Talk and Listen Signs

To Use: Cut out the pictures of the mouth and ear. Mount them on Popsicle sticks, and invite children to hold them in Step 2 as they take turns talking and listening.

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Appendix I

Quick Scripts for Solving Problems On the Spot

Offer children only as much support as they need to be successful. The less you say, the more responsibility children take for solving problems on their own.

When children report a problem, listen and restate. Then choose an ending.

1. So you want _____ and you want _____. What could you do to solve the problem? Is that okay with you?

2. Sounds like you're both unhappy about _____. What could you do differently? Does that work for you?

3. So, you want _____ and you want _____. What could you do that's fair to both of you? Is that okay with you?

4. Is _____ a good way to solve the problem? What else could you do? What else? Which idea do you both like?

5. So you're both _____ about _____. Sit over there. When you come up with an idea you both like, come and tell me.

6. Do you want me to solve the problem or do you want to solve it? How could you solve it? Which idea do you both like?

7. You're both fighting over _____. (Take the item.) You can have it back as soon as you have a plan.

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Appendix J

How to Encourage Independent Problem Solving

When Child #1 reports a conflict:

1. Listen. Restate. "So you feel _____ about _____?"
(feeling) (what happened)

2. Ask:
   - "How are you going to handle that?"
   - "What have you tried"
   - "What could you do to solve the problem?"

   Remind:

   - "Have you asked (Child #2) nicely?"
   - "Have you given (Child #2) an I-message?"
   - "Try that first. If it doesn't work, come back for help."

3. If the first child returns for help, bring the two together and facilitate communication either on the spot or later at Talk It Out time.

   - Say to Child #1, "Tell (Child #2) again how you feel and what you want."
   - Say to (Child #2), "Tell me what you heard (Child #1) say."
   - Say to Child #2, "Can you agree to _____?"
(specific behavior that makes the situation better)

4. If Child #2 also has a problem with Child #1, proceed with the six-step process. See Appendix C, How to Help Children Talk It Out, Facilitator's Script.

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Appendix K

How to Help Other Kids Talk It Out: Peer Peacemaker's Script

The Peacemaker first asks students, "Do you want me to help, or do you want to Talk It Out by yourselves?"

1. **Stop. Cool Off.**
   - Ask both: "Have you cooled off enough?"
2. **Talk and Listen to Each Other.**
3. **Find out What They Both Need.**
   - Pass out mouth and ear signs. "You talk first. You listen."
   - Ask the first talker, "What's the problem?"
   - Switch signs. Ask the second talker, "What's the problem?"
4. **Brainstorm Solutions.**
   - Ask both: "What could you do to solve the problem?"
5. **Choose the Idea You Both like Best.**
   - When an idea is given, ask the other child, "Is that okay with you?"
   - If the answer is no, ask, "Any other ideas?"
   - If the answer is yes, ask both, "Is the problem solved?"
6. **Make a Plan. Go for It!**
   - Ask, "What's the plan?"
   - Say, "Congratulations for solving the problem!"

If Someone Breaks a Rule, tell them,
"You're not allowed to
_____."
(interrupt, call names, etc.)

If a rule is broken two times, say, "We'll have to stop now."

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Appendix L

How To Talk It Out with a Student: Script for Teacher-Student Conflicts

1. Stop. Cool off. Decide How to Handle the Situation.

- Take time for both yourself and the student to cool off if necessary.
- Choose an appropriate response.

2. Talk and Listen to Each Other.

- Set forth your positive intention, such as, "I want to solve the problem in a way that works for both of us."
- Talk about the problem from your perspective using nonblaming language, such as, "I feel _____ when you _____ because _____."
- Ask the student to share his or her point of view. Really listen. Show you understand. Restate: "So you feel _____ because _____."

3. State the Problem in Terms of Need.

- Summarize: "It sounds like I need _____ and you need _____. Right?"

4. Brainstorm Solutions.

- Ask: "What could we do so that we're both happy?"
- Offer and elicit many ideas as quickly as possible without comments. Keep track of ideas by writing them down.
- Accept all ideas without making judgments.
- Keep attention focused on developing solutions: "Yes, we could _____. What else could we do?"

5. Choose the Idea(s) You Both like.

- Review the list and evaluate each idea. Ask, "Which idea works for both of us?"
- Choose the idea(s) you both like best.

6. Make a Plan. Establish a Consequence. Go for It!

- Develop a specific action plan: "What will we do? What needs to happen first? Then what?" Or, "How are we going to _____? When? Where? Who?"
- If you predict the child will have difficulty following the plan, establish a back-up plan that solves the problem in a way that is fair and respectful to the student.

Later, reflect and evaluate: "How did our solution work?"

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Appendix M

How to Talk It Out with a Student Who Presents a Conflict for You and for Another Student

(Script for Teacher-Student Conflict and Student-Student Conflict)

1. Stop. Cool Off. Decide How to Handle the Situation.

- Stop any inappropriate action quickly and firmly, using only as much force as necessary.
- Take time for both yourself and the student to cool off.
- Choose an appropriate response.
- If a child'a behvaior is a problem for you and for another student, address both conflicts, one at a time.

Dealing With the Teacher-Student Aspect of the Conflict:

Whenever the student is unresponsive or unwilling to participate, think aloud as you provide answers, information, ideas, or decisions. Continue to invite the student to participate every step of the way.

2. Talk and Listen to Each Other.

- Set forth your positive intention (e.g., "I want to solve the problem in a way that works for both of us.").
- Talk about the problem from your perspective using nonblaming language (e.g.,. "I feel _____ when you _____ because _____").
- Ask the student to share his or her point of view. Really listen. Show you understand. Restate: "So you feel _____ because _____."

3. State the Problem in Terms of Need. Summarize: "It sounds like I need _____ and you need _____. Right?

4. Brainstorm Solutions.

- Ask the student how the two of you can solve this in a way that works for both of you (e.g., "How can you express your anger without hurting others?" "The next time you _____, what can you do instead of _____?").
- Offer and elicit many ideas, as quickly as possible, without comments. Keep track of ideas by writing them down.
- Accept all ideas without making judgments.
- Keep attention focused on developing solutions: "Yes, we could _____. What else could we do?"

5. Choose the Idea(s) You Both Like Best.

- Review the list and evaluate each idea. Ask, "Which idea works for both of us?"
- Choose the idea(s) you both like.

6. Make a Plan. Establish a Consequence. Go for It!

- Develop a specific action plan. Get an agreement from the child to made a change (e.g., "What will we do? What needs to happen first? Then what?" "How are we going to _____? When . . . ? Where . . . ? Who . . . ?"
- If you predict the child will have difficulty following the plan, establish a back-up plan that solves the problem (or controls the problem behavior) in a way that is fair and respectful to the child.
- If the problem behavior reoccurs, follow through with the consequences already established until the child makes a positive change.

Later, Reflect and Evaluate: "How did our solution work?"

Dealing With the Student-Student Aspect of the Conflict:

Teacher helps disputants . . .

1. Stop. Cool Off.

- When a child reports a conflict, listen. Restate.
- Provide a cooling off time/activity if necessary. Ask, "What would help you feel better?"

2. Talk and Listen to Each Other.

- Meet with both students.
- Ask the first child: "What's the problem? How are you feeling?" Restate.
- Help the first child practice direct communication. Use I-message if appropriate. "Tell (the second child) how you are feeling and why. Start with I."

  "I _____ when you _____
  (feeling) (specific action)

  because _____."
  (how it affects me)

- Ask the second child the same as above.
- Optional: Check for understanding. Say to each child, "Tell me what you heard _____ say."

3. Find Out What You Both Need.

- Summarize what you heard. Point out common interests. State problem in terms of need. "So it sounds like (the first child) needs _____ and (the second child) needs _____. Right?"

4. Brainstorm Solutions.

- Ask both, "What could you do to solve the problem?"
- Elicit many ideas as quickly as possible without comments. Keep track of children's ideas. If there are lots of ideas, write them down. Accept all ideas without making judgments.
- Keep children's attention focused on developing solutions. "Yes, you could _____. What else could you do?"

5. Choose the Idea You Both Like Best.

- For each idea, ask both children, "Does that work for you?"
- Help children choose a win/win solution. Ask, "Is the problem solved?"

6. Make a Plan. Go for It!

- Ask questions that elicit a specific action plan: "What will you do? What needs to happen first? Then what?"

  "How are you going to _____? When? Where? Who?
  "If this happened again, what could you do differently?

- Congratulate children on their hard work.

Later, Help Children Reflect and Evaluate: "How did your solution work?"

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Talk It Out
Response Form

Now that you have read about my experience, tell me about yours. I welcome your comments, suggestions, ideas, and questions. I will pass them on to other teachers.

1. What worked well for you and your students?

2. What didn't work?

3. What are your suggestions for change?

4. Do you have any new ideas or materials to share?

5. What are your questions?

Tell Me About Yourself:

Name

Address

City/State/Zip

Grade Level

Return to:
Barbara Porro
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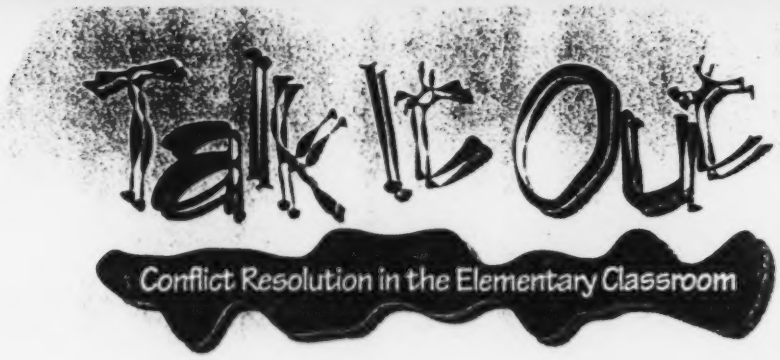

"Teaching math and reading," Barbara Porro confesses, "has always been a piece of cake compared with the overwhelming task of handling my students' everyday problems." Several years ago, however, after receiving formal training in conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation, Porro decided to confront these problems head-on by teaching her students to solve their own problems. The result was a six-step conflict resolution process called Talk It Out.

Designed for busy teachers, Talk It Out focuses on resolving real-life problems that occur in most classrooms—teasing, put-downs, pushing, hitting, cheating, gossiping, refusing to share. In this book, you'll read about Porro's experiences with teaching children how to Talk It Out rather than fight it out. You'll get practical tips, lesson plans, step-by-step scripts, and other materials that will be useful in introducing conflict resolution skills and helping students internalize them.

As students learn to deal with conflict on their own, you'll have more time for the lessons you've planned, fewer complaints from parents, and less stress in your life. Best of all, your students will have gained valuable skills that, like math and reading, will serve them the rest of their lives!

Barbara Porro taught 14 years in the classroom before becoming an educational consultant. During the past eight years she has conducted conflict resolution workshops for elementary teachers throughout the United States.

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